

PLAYING THE GAPS:  
A WORLDLY THEORY OF PREACHING

A Professional Project  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the  
School of Theology at Claremont

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Ministry

by  
Joseph M. Webb  
May 1994

*This professional project, completed by*

Joseph M. Webb

---

*has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty  
of the School of Theology at Claremont in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of*

**DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

*Faculty Committee*

Burton L. Mock

Kathy Black

---

May 2, 1994  
Date

Mayorie Luchini  
Dean

## Abstract

### Playing the Gaps: A Worldly Theory of Preaching

by

Joseph M. Webb

This D.Min. project began as a study by this student of an unpublished manuscript by Burton L. Mack, Professor of New Testament in the School of Theology at Claremont. The manuscript was titled, "The Gospel and the Gaps: A Worldly Theory of Preaching." Under Mack's direction, this project represents an extensive revision, elaboration and preparation of that work for publication. The student has not only rearranged and carefully edited the manuscript materials, but has added a number of original sections to the overall discussion. These are carefully noted within the work.

What is unusual about this project is that it represents a critique of what is generally called "biblical preaching." It attempts to rework the objective of preaching, presenting it not as an effort to "apply" the bible to people's lives, but, instead, to assist people in dealing with the "gaps" that exist in the process of living--gaps between and among the symbolic "worlds" in which all must live. One of these worlds is the world of the bible, but the focus becomes the "gap" rather than the bible. In addition, the study examines preaching from the point of view of anthropological, cultural and communications research, concentrating on such things as imagination, ritual and myth-making. What emerges is a view of preaching as the "reflective" dimension of the liturgy, a time when the congregation meditates together on the processes and demands of creating a world both humane and harmonious.

Chapter 1 introduces the concept of the "gap" as having theological, sociological and literary roots. Chapter 2 examines the symbolic nature of the human imagination, introducing the notion of the "hub symbol," and then

explores the complex and often distressing "gaps" that arise as one lives, imaginatively, in four simultaneous worlds. Chapter 3 enlarges the framework to include the role of religion and the imaginative process of myth-making in the four symbolic worlds, beginning as well a consideration of the sermon's role in human myth-making. Chapter 4 adds the important ingredient of multiculturalism, considering how recent changes in cultural movements and reconfigurations have worked together to create a new symbolically "marginalized" individual whose "gaps" are also among cultures, ethnic origins and the religions of the world. Chapter 5 examines the nature and role of the Christian bible in the "gap" process, placing the bible into the context of all sacred writing, while, at the same time, indicating its role in the preaching situation. Chapter 6, then, considers both the future of preaching as a "gap" process and offers a series of suggestions for the preparation and presentation of these kinds of sermons.

## CONTENTS

PREFACE . . . . .	v
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION: "GAP" AS A PREACHING PARADIGM . . . . .	1
2. "GAPS" AND THE HUMAN IMAGINATION . . . . .	9
The Nature and Power of Symbolization . . . . .	10
The Key Role of the "Hub Symbol" . . . . .	15
The Four Symbolic "Worlds" . . . . .	23
The "Gaps" Among the "Worlds" . . . . .	31
3. PREACHING, RITUAL AND MYTH-MAKING . . . . .	38
What Role for Religion? . . . . .	42
Religion and Social Symbolism . . . . .	44
The Construction of Symbolic Myth . . . . .	49
Mediating Between Ideal and Actual . . . . .	56
4. THE "GAPS" AND THE MULTICULTURAL PERSON . . . . .	60
Some Origins of Change . . . . .	63
Intra-American Cultural Movement . . . . .	65
Inter-American Migration . . . . .	68
Evaluating Cultural Configurations . . . . .	70
The New "Marginal" Person . . . . .	75
Playing the Cultural "Gaps" . . . . .	80
5. THE BIBLE AND THE "GAPS" . . . . .	83
The Bible and Supernaturalism . . . . .	84
Protestantism and "Biblical Preaching" . . . . .	88
The Transcultural Message Problem . . . . .	91
The Bible's Epic Function . . . . .	93

The Bible and the Sermon . . . . .	96
Discard the Bible? . . . . .	98
6. THE PROCESS OF "GAP PREACHING" . . . . .	107
Does Christianity Have a Future? . . . . .	108
Remaking the Christian Symbols . . . . .	111
What Does the Sermon Do? . . . . .	117
Some Guidelines for Preparation . . . . .	119
"Playing" in the Pulpit . . . . .	128
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	134

## PREFACE

There probably was a time even in the United States when the pulpits of the land were close to the world of human affairs and had the ear of the nation.\* That was when the Christian religion and American culture seemed to agree on many things, and when American culture, even as it evolved, could keep itself segregated from challenging cultures. From churches at the center of town to cathedrals on the avenues of all the large cities, what preachers had to say mattered. After all, many Protestant preachers of the past were learned, had leisure for reading, and kept abreast of the affairs of the world, both through higher education and travel. The biographies of several prominent clergy of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries bear witness to this phenomenon. Parishioners depended upon these clergy for information and trusted their judgments on the issues of the day. They also hoped for a bit of enlightenment and acculturation, some exposure to the riches of the grand traditions of things and the canons of literature. Topics were just as important as texts, and sermons were judged as intellectual achievements and professional performances. There was such a thing as great preaching.

But no one expects to hear great preaching anymore. Today, there are few, if any, national pulpits and there is no certain sound, theological or

---

\* Here and at noted points throughout this project, the materials represent the writing of Burton L. Mack, Professor of New Testament in the School of Theology at Claremont. They are drawn from Mack's unpublished manuscript, "The Gospel and the Gaps: A Worldly Theory of Preaching," 1993. They have been edited, rearranged and amplified by this writer, with the permission and direction of the author. The five chapters of Mack's manuscript are: Chapter 1, "When the Message Blurs"; Chapter 2, "In the Course of a Liturgy"; Chapter 3, "With the Bible in the Background"; Chapter 4, "As the Practice of a Religion"; and Chapter 5, "With the Whole World in View." The evolution of the present work from that manuscript will become clear in the next few pages.

otherwise, coming from all the many churches of the land. Likewise, there are few connoisseurs of enlightened sermons and nary a public critic in sight who follows the pulpit. Virtually no lay person goes out of the way any more to savor a sermon or stay over Sunday to check the delivery or insight of local pastor or priest. The preacher may suffer critique, to be sure, but not from critics who are looking for the aesthetic object, analyzing the literary achievement, assessing the wisdom, or appraising the performance of a skilled practitioner in a demanding profession of public presentation.

Yet there they are--there we are--Christian preachers, thousands of us, Sunday after Sunday, preaching the gospel, or at least what we think the gospel to be, in our churches. Think of the energy, the intellectual labor, the brooding, the frustration and, yes, the spirit, that are poured weekly into the homiletic undertaking. Sermons are regularly announced ahead of time for pulpits everywhere from city center to country crossroad, and they promise fresh scripts and lively performances week after week.

What, pray tell, is going on? One might think that cultural critics would tell us. The Los Angeles Times, to name only one great newspaper, pays critics to view art exhibits, read literature, listen to music and attend concerts, visit movies and other performing arts. Since crowds of various sizes gather in our sanctuaries on a systematic basis--just as they do for movies or the performing arts--such critics, one would think, might want to render a judgment on how we preachers are doing, and whether we are worth attending to. Yet what we say, and how well we say it, never gets discussed in the public media. The Times does not pay critics to go to churches and listen to sermons. About all we can conclude is that what we preachers say, and how we conduct ourselves as public "performers," does not count in the buzz of worldly affairs; or that the Christianity that we profess is no longer in any meaningful touch with American culture anymore. What has happened to change the social



circumstance from what it once was? If the cultural critics will not tell us, perhaps we had better try to tell ourselves.

What has happened is not only that the world in which we are living has become more complex and difficult to address, but many who have dared to speak for Christianity have cut a pitiful image, an utterly repugnant image as far as those who tend the public taste are concerned. The current popular stereotype of the preacher stems largely from the performance of religious entrepreneurs who publicly trade in the desire for personal, even highly-privatized, religious experience. Such is the myriad of revivalists, healers, radio preachers and television evangelists. With them, preaching has taken on exaggerated theatrical pretensions, glitzy snakeoil trappings and reactionary shenanigans. Preaching, in that highly visible mode, is overwhelmingly a manifestation of the preacher's own charisma and sense of personal importance. The preacher is detached, not only from the larger social and cultural worlds which he or she condemns, but even from the context of a Christian congregation as well. Those addressed are treated as isolated individuals, and the "trinkets for sale" do not include any potion for social ills or songs for cultural celebrations.

The success of a handful of these preachers is a phenomenon that documents the accommodation of a splinter of Christianity to the worst of the American dream. It amounts to nothing so much as what might be described as a cult of personality, of an unrelenting drive for celebrity. As part of the emergence of this phenomenon, popular Christianity has slipped to the level where cults of powerful personalities generate the desire for personal spiritual transformations, private solutions to common problems, and exceptional miracles to dramatize the banality of otherwise impoverished lives. Who has not had the bad luck to happen upon such a public display of personal conceit? Is it any wonder that cultural critics, those who render

public commentary, try not to notice? If this is what it means to preach, the game is up, and Christians--including us preachers--should concede on grounds of embarrassment alone.

Which is, of course, exactly what many who started out in the ministry have done. It is what many who otherwise have felt "called" to the ministry, to the preaching task, realize and why they quickly turn from the pull of the pulpit to other things. Still, though, there are a lot of diehards who experience daily that embarrassment, but refuse to give up the task, who do, in fact, believe that preaching, if it does not have much of a future, ought to have. And there are even a few of us who are somewhat intent on seeing what we might have to do to change the current popular image about preachers and preaching. Some of us actually believe that, given the right set of circumstances, preaching could turn good again, if not great. We believe that preaching could at least become relevant again to the lives of people, people who live deeply in this complex world, who care about what is going on around them and are looking for some help in making it a better place. Maybe good preachers, and good preaching, could help. Maybe.

This study represents an effort to rethink the preaching process, the process of sermon-making. It starts with basic things and tries to relocate them. The project itself, presented here as partial fulfillment of the Doctor of Ministry requirements, has a strange background. After taking Prof. Burton L. Mack's course on the gospel of John, and becoming increasingly perplexed with the problems of preaching from such an odd document, this student followed up with a four-unit independent study course, also with Mack, on the preaching problems with a gospel constructed as John obviously was.

As the semester progressed, Mack made available a manuscript on which he was working on the subject of preaching. It is titled, "The Gospel and the Gaps: A Worldly Theory of Preaching." Mack invited the student to

read it and write a critique, as it were, of it. What began at that point was an extended series of discussions over the manuscript itself. As a result of those discussions, Mack invited this student to become part of a revision of the manuscript, incorporating a number of matters that the discussions produced. The goal would be a preparation of a book on preaching as a jointly-prepared work. It was then determined that the extended revision would provide a manuscript to meet the requirement as well for the D.Min. project at the School of Theology at Claremont. What follows here is that manuscript. While Mack's central ideas are very much intact here, it cannot be said that he necessarily agrees, at this stage, with everything said here. Such agreement, before publication, will have to arise at a later stage.

This student is also indebted to Prof. Kathy Black who accepted an invitation to join what obviously was a project already underway. She, too, is familiar with Mack's manuscript and has become involved in the discussions that are to some extent reflected in this work. Her evaluations and suggestions concerning the manuscript have been extremely valuable in taking this work through these early drafts. Special note must also be made of the patience and skill of Elaine Walker, the School of Theology's thesis secretary; her keen eye played its role in this project as well.

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction: "Gap" as a Preaching Paradigm

Despite the seeming endless supply of proscriptions and prescriptions for improving the art or craft of the sermon, there are still relatively few of what we might call preaching paradigms, with paradigm defined as an orientation to or overall pattern for the sermon-making process. A few recent books have provided summaries of the major existing paradigms.<sup>1</sup> While there is merit, of course, to these various paradigms, they do not, by any means, exhaust the possible orientations for sermon conception, creation and presentation. In fact, several streams of modern thinking suggest other preaching paradigms.

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, Thomas G. Long's book, The Witness of Preaching (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), opens with a discussion of three such "paradigms." He does so by discussing three models of the preacher, but each model is connected to a particular orientation to the sermon. He first discusses the preacher as "herald," with "proclamation" being the general sermon paradigm associated with that model. Second, he examines the preacher as "pastor," a model that gives rise to a sermon paradigm that can be described as "counseling." Finally, he considers the preacher as "storyteller," a fairly recent model which has come to be tied to a paradigm of the sermon as, for want of something better, a "story" to be "spun." Significantly, a part of this latter paradigm is the "inductive" orientation for sermon development and presentation, and, in a sense, that is probably a better way to describe the paradigm used by the "storyteller." Long pays tribute to each of these while using his book to develop another model and paradigm of his own. For Long, the preacher is a "witness" and his sermon paradigm is that of presenting one's "testimony."

Other such paradigms can be found as well. In A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletical Method by Richard L. Eslinger (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987) the discussions focus on five different orientations, among them preaching as "story," the "narrative" in the black preaching tradition, the "sermonic plot," the "inductive" method and David Buttrick's "phenomenological method."

A very different orientation, or paradigm, for the sermon is found in Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective by Christine M. Smith (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).

This study proposes one such other preaching paradigm, a model or pattern by which most sermons may be constructed and presented in the contemporary pulpit. It is a paradigm based on the metaphor of the "gap," the space between things. The preacher, that is, becomes a "player of life's gaps," as we shall see. One looks at things, in other words--things that are prepared for and brought into the pulpit--not by focusing on this substance or that, not even by focusing on this text or that one, on this topic or that one, but, instead, by focusing on the "gaps" that one finds between these and other things. This orientation to the sermon assumes that, in these days, we all live in the "gaps." We are forced, in a sense, to constantly be dealing with the discrepancies, the tensions, and the contradictions that the gaps in all areas of human life force upon us. To decide to focus on those "gaps," to acknowledge them and make them the "stuff" of our sermons, is to make contact, in a strikingly honest way, with where the people are who come to share sermons. The assumption, moreover, is that when we do let our sermons push and pull, move into and out of, the gaps of living and life, more people will, in fact, be interested in hearing what we say from our pulpits. This becomes preaching, in other words, as a process of "playing the gaps" and helping our congregants to "play" their "gaps" as well.

The idea of the "gap" as a preaching paradigm is not, however, pulled from the air. It is a concept that springs from some of the most progressive and creative dimensions of our time. It is found, for example, at or near the heart of at least three major intellectual orientations from which preaching is understood to be formed: theology, social-psychology and language theory. Since we do, in fact, seek to ground preaching in the insights of these three critical areas, in this study we simply borrow the "gap" metaphor as a way to create a fresh and invigorating framework for conceptualizing, structuring

and directing the sermon process. A few brief notes indicating the nature of the "gap" in these three areas of modern thought is certainly in order.

First, the "gap" is based on a solid theological footing, as any theory of preaching should be. In fact, the "gap" is, itself, a theological concept at the very core of modern Process Theology. What is now known as Process Theology has arisen from the work of Alfred North Whitehead<sup>2</sup> and Charles Hartshorne<sup>3</sup> and given its current form in the work of John B. Cobb Jr., a few of his colleagues and his students.<sup>4</sup> It contends, as the term implies, that theology is not about "substances," even though some certainly exist. Theology, instead, though, is about movement, about the dynamics of creative transformation, about the constant struggle of incarnation between the human and the divine, the divine and the human. One does not find theology--one does not find "God," in other words--in essences, but in the tensions, the moments that endlessly grow into and create new moments, the paradoxes that always seem to break apart into new paradoxes. One finds God, if God is indeed something that can be "found," in the places where things "flint together"

---

<sup>2</sup> Among Whitehead's most relevant works from the 1920s are Religion in the Making (New York: Macmillan, 1926); Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect (New York: Macmillan, 1927); and Process and Reality (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

<sup>3</sup> Among Hartshorne's most important works are Beyond Humanism: Essays in the Philosophy of Nature (New York: Willett, Clark and Co., 1937) and, much later, A Natural Theology for our Time (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> Of particular significance for this study are John B. Cobb Jr. and David Ray Griffin, Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), probably the best introduction to the subject. The ideas singled out in this discussion are drawn from that book. In addition, though, two of Cobb's other works are very helpful for the preaching process. They are Process Theology as Political Theology (Manchester: Manchester University Press; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), and Christ In a Pluralistic Age (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975).

into sparks. One finds God, if you will, in the "negative spaces" that, by their persistence, become the positive spaces; that is, one finds God always in the "gaps." Process Theology is, in a profound sense, "gap" theology.

There are numerous characteristics within process philosophy and theology that, taken together, form a working theological base for "gap preaching," even though this is not the place for extended discussion of that relationship. We should mention, though, two key notions in Process Theology that inform gap preaching as we shall discuss it. First, Process Theology is, by its nature, a skeptical theology, as this view of the preaching process will tend to be, with skeptical here referring to an assumption of impermanence. It requires, moreover, that one must be constantly "on guard" for anything that appears to become too fixed. Certainties tend always to be suspect. What one holds as solid today one knows is already slipping away. Behind the "reality" that one admires now is always a "counter-reality" ready to challenge and displace it, one that contains "today" but opens into a different tomorrow. For every bright memory to which one clings there are numerous dark memories crowding in to modify and "relieve" the brightness; and vice versa. One knows, in Process Theology, to constantly beware of whatever appears to be certain or fixed; one knows, in Process Theology, that things are not merely seldom, but they are never quite what they appear to be. The skeptical attitude called for in Process Theology is one which knows that the only thing certain--and even that is a shaky way to say it--is the process of the process. The only place from which one's eye must never be allowed to stray is the point of movement, of motion, of action. It is the skeptical eye that stays trained on the points of human intersection, the points of disruption in thought and imagination. It is the skeptical eye that knows to stay trained, if we may, on the "gaps."

A second characteristic of Process Theology that serves to undergird "gap preaching" is the idea that the future is, by its nature, always emergent, always novel and always unpredictable. That, in fact, is what makes living itself such a tight-rope enterprise. Process Theology knows that some semblance of order and "control" is necessary for the human species to live in community, whether a large or a small one; but what it emphasizes and tries to understand is the fact that even in highly-structured living, everything is always moving and shifting and try as we may we can never keep the emergent within our grasp. Such is the very nature of human interaction, whether in interchanges involving two or three people or in complex collectivities. This, too, is at the heart of what we shall explore as "gap preaching." While it makes room for tradition, ritual and memory as part of the sermon process, the preaching ultimately is future-oriented. It is preaching that will not try to enforce some static past or present, but that, by its nature, seeks to honestly participate in and even celebrate the tensions of creating new life and new community.

Every type of preaching and every preaching paradigm is supported by theology, by theological assumptions, whether implicitly or explicitly. "Gap preaching" as a paradigm for the sermon is no different. Its theology is Process Theology, even though this theology rejects most traditional theological categories and arguments, as does "gap preaching," which also rejects many traditional homiletical categories, something that will become apparent as we proceed. But good theology is at work here, and the preaching that arises from it is a preaching that fits the needs and demands of the modern world.

This means, of course, that any paradigm of preaching, like the "gap paradigm" of this study, must have more than just a theological base.



Preaching is, by its very nature, also a social act, one carried out in a complex social situation. So preaching must also be based on a working sociological, or social-psychological formulation as well, in order to be fully effective.

Ironically, one of the most vibrant and influential traditions in American twentieth century social-psychological thought had its origins with, and breathed the same air as, the process philosophy of Whitehead. This intellectual tradition has come to be known as Symbolic Interactionism; it will be discussed and documented at length in Chapter 1. It is associated with the thought of Whitehead's contemporary, George Herbert Mead, who with a group of social theorists at the University of Chicago in the 1920s and 30s, devised a dynamic view of human behavior. Instead of the word "process," they used, as we just indicated, the word "interaction," but the meanings of the two terms were remarkably similar. Human relationships, it was believed, are not static in any way; they are always changing, always shifting, always incorporating past behavior into present action. The future is emergent and novel, never fully predictable, always subject to both transcendence and subversion. What is important to note here is that at the heart--again--of symbolic interactionism is the idea of the "gap." In order to understand human behavior, or why people behave as they do, one must look at the nature of the "exchanges" between and among them, at their "interactions." One must look, in other words, at what takes place in the "gaps" between them, both locationally and over time. So the "gap" as a paradigm for preaching, as we shall explain it, is well-grounded in social-psychological theory; in fact, a great deal of what we shall say about it at several places will be built in large part from some of these social-psychological insights.

The notion of the "gap" as a preaching paradigm also has important roots in contemporary literary, or, more specifically, contemporary language

theory. What has come to be known as Postmodernism in the arts is a kind of "gap" orientation to language. If we take it, say, from the formulations of the French writer and critic Jacques Derrida, we know it as a theory of "cutting," of carving and pasting, of deconstructing and reconstructing.

("Deconstruction" is Derrida's well-known controlling metaphor.<sup>5</sup>) The domain of literature and discourse, he says, is built by a kind of continual "juxtapositioning," a process resembling film montage, where relationships among all the diverse pieces, if they exist at all, are "caused" or inferred by the way in which the "gaps" between them are sutured together. One does not, as it were, look for the "logic" of discourse; one looks for how the "gaps" are handled, and there one finds the "overlaps" and the "incisions." The point, in short, is that messages, as it were, are made from the "gaps," from the spaces made by cutting and pasting; they are made from the "jumps," the repetitions and the playful unravelings of story and image. They are made by manipulating the gaps.

These notes are intended to make clear that the notion of the "gap" is a dominant part of virtually all contemporary thinking from which the process of preaching draws its direction and its meaning. This exploration of "gap preaching" or of learning to find and "preach the gaps" is a rich undertaking, worthy of the time and effort of every preacher who wishes to touch and move people today. This is not, though, another manual on preaching, even though

---

<sup>5</sup> Derrida's work is, by now, widely available in translation in the United States. It is turgid and difficult to read, but well worth the effort for someone interested in the state of language and discourse theory. Reading Derrida should begin today with a new reader, an annotated, edited anthology of his work. Edited by Peggy Kamuf, it is titled A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). Other works by Derrida, though, that have relevance for the preacher and preaching scholar include Writing and Difference (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Of Grammatology (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); and Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

it is deeply concerned with how the quality of preaching can be improved. It does not focus on method, technique or even procedures for preparation or delivery of the sermon. What follows here, instead, is an exploration of the meaning of preaching, of how preaching is related to the human mind, to the imagination, to culture, religion and sacred writing. This study owes much to cultural and anthropological studies, to rhetorical and communications understandings. These are the general areas that are brought to bear on the nature of preaching.

## CHAPTER 2

## "Gaps" and the Human Imagination

What happens during the sermon? What happens as the sermon itself is preached? What goes on in the heads, in the minds or the imaginations of those who sit quietly and listen to the one who preaches? How do minds work? Or what, in the words of anthropologist Leslie White, is "minding,"--the process<sup>1</sup>--and how do we, both preacher and hearer, go about it? What, in other words, do we know about the nature of human consciousness and its activation in the preaching situation? We begin, in short, by asking why we think as we do and about the relationship between our thinking and acting. What is imagination? From what is it made? And how does it shape the patterns and behaviors of our lives? More to the point, where are the "gaps" in it, the gaps that show us its dynamics, the gaps that we can utilize at the center of our preaching processes? That is where our study of preaching begins; in fact, it is where every study of preaching ought to begin: at the beginning of who we are, what we are like, and why.

We will go about this process in two stages, largely following the lead of our questions. First, we will explore the nature of the human mind or imagination, drawing largely on the history and theory of modern communication and symbolic theory. Second, we will examine the "worlds" from which the dominant symbolic material is drawn for the Christian "imagination." This will give us a way to see the freshness and usefulness of

---

<sup>1</sup> Leslie A. White, The Science of Culture (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1949). See the chapter titled, "Mind Is Minding," in which White distinguishes between the mind and the brain and argues that the word "mind" should be a verb rather than a noun.

the "gap" theory from yet another important vantage point.

### The Nature and Power of Symbolization

We begin with a renewed sense of what we are as human beings. We are, as Kenneth Burke reminds us, animals with the unique power of symbolization, the power that, in effect, separates us from the animal world, or so it appears. The human is an animal, Burke says, but "we are the kind of animal that approaches everything through modes of thought developed by the use of our symbol systems; what we don't have names for, we at least think of as 'namable'--and in this respect we differ categorically from animals whose relation to their environment eliminates this roundable, midway stage."<sup>2</sup> More than that, virtually all of the evidence at our disposal indicates that our very humanness, our consciousness and self-consciousness results from this symbol ability. Our entire human growing-up process, our socialization and maturation into our cultural setting is a process of collecting and assimilating symbols; mostly, these are words, even though words are not our only symbols. The definition of a symbol, from this perspective, is a

---

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Burke, Language as Symbolic Action (Berkeley: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 28. The whole of Burke's extensive work, as diverse as it is, can be seen as a meditation on the nature of human symbolization and the ways in which that symbolization structures life and human relationship. Burke asks at one point "just how overwhelmingly much of what we mean by 'reality' has been built up for us through nothing but our symbol systems? Take away our books, and what little do we know about history, biography, or even something so 'down to earth' as the relative position of seas and continents? What is our 'reality' for today (beyond the paper-thin line of our own particular lives) but all this clutter of symbols about the past combined with whatever things we know mainly through maps, magazines, newspapers and the like about the present? In school, as we go from class to class, students turn from one idiom to another. The various courses in the curriculum are in effect so many different terminologies. And however important to us is the tiny sliver of reality each of us has experienced, firsthand, the whole overall 'picture' is but a construct of our symbol systems." Language as Symbolic Action, 5.

communicative one, well grounded in American communicative and social-psychological theory. A symbol may be defined as anything--literally anything--into which a individual places meaning and feeling.<sup>3</sup>

The words, the objects, the people, the places, etc.--anything--come to us from our environments, where they are and have been. They are, as it were, already symbols for others, at least for all those who before us have put meaning and feeling into those "things." When we as individuals "learn" one of those "things" by giving it meaning and feeling as well, that "thing," whatever it is, becomes at that point a symbol for us.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> This is different from the way in which a symbol was thought of a few generations ago. The "old" definition was that a symbol was something that pointed, as it were, to something else, to something beyond itself; and there is, without question, a measure of truth to that. The "new" definition, though, emphasizes that the symbol is a human construct, one that enables the human species to conceptualize and give form to the world. Three separate statements of this definition--apart from Burke--are worth noting. The first is from the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer in his book, An Essay on Man (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944). In his chapter titled, "A Clue to the Nature of Man: The Symbol," Cassirer writes, for example, that "man has, as it were, discovered a new method of adapting himself to his environment. Between the receptor system and the effector system, which are to be found in all animal species, we find in man a third link which we may describe as the *symbolic system*. This new acquisition transforms the whole of human life. As compared with the other animals, man lives not merely in a broader reality; he lives, so to speak, in a new *dimension* of reality. . . .No longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe" (p. 24). This orientation to the symbol is the basis, in fact, for Cassirer's three-volume study entitled, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953-57), Vol. 1 of which is sub-titled, Language.

One finds very similiar definitions of a symbol also in Susanne Langer's work, most accessible probably in her litle book, Philosophical Sketches (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962). It is found there in her chapter titled, "On a New Definition of 'Symbol.'"

Virtually the same definition is also found in Leslie A. White's The Science of Culture, referred to earlier. In his chapter, "The Symbol: The Origin and Basis of Human Behavior," he defines the symbol as a "thing the value or meaning of which is bestowed upon it by those who use it" (p. 25). Meaning, in other words, is something conferred on "anything"; meaning does arise from the "thing" itself," even though some relationships may be established in the conferring of meaning (p. 25).

<sup>4</sup> The orientation to the symbol and its role in human consciousness that is summarized in these paragraphs represents a complex and influential

Every symbol has two components: meaning, or its dictionary designation, and feeling, which refers to what we might call its emotional or visceral charge, whether negative or positive. We either accept both of these dimensions as they are when we appropriate the symbol, or we accept and modify them by changing the meaning somewhat or altering the amount of the kind of emotion that we place into the symbol. Significantly, when we learn or assimilate a symbol, we pick up not only its meaning, but also the emotional charge. Moreover, a significant amount of research tells us that in the relationship between symbol-learning and behavior, the power of the emotional or visceral dimension is usually far more significant than the meaning or cognitive dimension.<sup>5</sup> After we have a symbol or set of symbols--

---

tradition in American social scholarship. It has its roots early in this century largely in the work of George Herbert Mead who, with several colleagues, taught and worked at the University of Chicago. It was Mead who coined the term, now in common usage, "social psychology" as a means of contending that one discipline could not function well without the other; they were two sides of the same coin. It was Mead who put the new idea of the symbol--or what he called the "significant symbol"--into the American social vocabulary. It was Mead who influenced Cassirer who influenced Langer, along with many others. While Mead wrote no books, his lectures and numerous articles have been collected and are still widely printed and studied. Among them are the ones in which the above concepts are elaborated, particularly Mind, Self and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), and On Social Psychology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956). What Mead set in motion was a remarkable tradition of research based on symbolism that merged the best insights of psychology and sociology. The tradition came to be known as "symbolic interactionism," two words that provide the dual lynchpins of the orientation. The best overall introductions to the orientation can be found in two extensive collections of articles. One is Symbolic Interaction: A Reader in Social Psychology edited by Jerome G. Manis and Bernard M. Meltzer (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1967), a book that has gone through several editions. The other is Human Nature and Collective Behavior edited by Tamotsu Shibutani (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1973).

Kenneth Burke, of course, was also heavily influenced by the tradition, as was Burke's most prolific student, Hugh Dalziel Duncan. The major book among Duncan's three studies of symbolism is Symbols and Social Theory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969).

<sup>5</sup> While this idea of the dominance of the emotional or feeling state over the cognitive runs throughout the work of Mead and other "symbolic interactionists," it is also given full expression in the work of others,

and the assimilation of symbols goes on throughout life--whenever that symbol is conjured up by us, or in our presence, both the meaning and the emotional charge that we attach to it are activated within us. Our behavior in and to the conjuring of that symbol is shaped, to an overwhelming extent, by the degree of the emotional charge that the symbol sets off within us. It is this fact, however, that is most often overlooked in our understanding of human symbolism. We shall return to the dimension of our symbols in a moment. A few other observations about how we use and handle symbols will fill out our understanding.

We have already indicated that our symbols come to us from outside of ourselves. Kenneth Burke has envisioned a metaphor of a large house with many rooms, a house in which a party is underway, and appears to have been underway for a long time.<sup>6</sup> A new person arrives at the front door, knocks, is admitted and walks gingerly into the first room. The room is lively, no one stops to introduce the new person to everyone else, and so the task begins of listening to the conversation already underway. In so doing, he or she learns the topic of discussion, picks up the language--without any real help--and, finally, begins to take part in the discussion, adding his or her own thoughts to the group. Then, into the next room, where something entirely different is going on; there the process repeats itself, with the person listening, picking

---

particularly in that of Ernst Cassirer. In his discussion of the symbol, for example, Cassirer says: "For side by side with conceptual language there is an emotional language; side by side with logical or scientific language there is a language of poetic imagination. Primarily language does not express thoughts or ideas, but feelings and affections." An Essay on Man, 25.

Burke, too, makes this an underlying assumption of virtually all his work. One will find it explicitly, for example, in his essay "Semantic and Poetic Meaning," in The Philosophy of Literary Form (New York: Vintage Books, 1941).

<sup>6</sup> Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form, 94-96.



up, learning the "new agenda," finally talking a bit within the context of the conversation, adds some new thoughts to what is going on and heads for the next room. Back and forth, then, from room to room, before, shall we say, leaving the conversations and the house forever, presumably by the back door. The story of the "unending conversation" is useful in giving us some bearings on how we are shaped by our environment, symbolic and otherwise, and to what extent--and how--we add our own original contributions to the life "conversation." We are born into a symbolic system of "rooms" or "groups" or "worlds" or whatever, where we hear, learn and appropriate, mostly by listening, studying and paying attention, and then, at some point, we give those symbols our own thoughtful meanings and emotional twists and make them our contribution to what is going on in the "rooms" or various symbolic "worlds" of which we are a part. This is a picture of our lives. What also becomes obvious from this illustration is that the meanings and feelings that we "learn" and appropriate from one room go with us as we move to the next room. In fact, what we ultimately decide to say in the next room may be shaped to a considerable extent by what we learned and symbolically "created" in the first room.

Two things become readily apparent, however. First, while there may, in fact, be some overlap of symbolic language, agenda, structure and feeling from one room to the other (to continue Burke's metaphor), the fact is that there are enormous discrepancies as we move from room to room, discrepancies that may be so large as to cause us symbolic pain. The fact is, too, that if that symbolic dissonance is great enough we will simply refuse to "go into that room"--it will not become part of us. Often, though, we are able to somehow handle the discrepancies, learn to shift from one room to another, despite the different languages, agendas and discussions, holding them in a

kind of tension and working, as it were, in more than one "world." It seems to be a part of the human symbolic ability to be able to live with that. It is those symbolic discrepancies, in fact, that we are going to focus on as a guide to the preaching process, except we are going to refer to them as the symbolic "gaps" in the ways in which we must live our lives. This is all, granted, a complex human matter that we are trying to simplify without destroying its fascinating complexity. Later, too, we shall turn our attention to the nature of several of these symbolic "worlds" from which our own individual symbolic universe is created, the idiosyncratic universe that shapes all of our behavior as individuals toward everything and everybody around us.

#### The Key Role of the "Hub Symbol"

We are able to return, though, to the characteristics of the symbol--and particularly to the unique role that emotion and feeling play in our symbolic behavior. The question we face--and it is, in a sense, an invisible question--concerns the way in which we go about organizing all of the many symbols that we learn, symbols that we take in and somehow must make our own. Once we learn a symbol, we cannot reject it. The only thing we can do is find a place for it within our existing symbol system. And we have already seen that have a compartmentalizing ability. But how do we organize the symbols we have; and how do we keep re-organizing them, since each symbol change or addition requires some reorganization?<sup>7</sup>

---

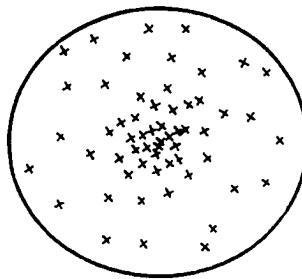
<sup>7</sup> Very little scholarly research has been done on the question, and yet, as we shall see, it lies at the heart of why we behave as we do, in particular: why do we behave in such volatile and emotional ways? The discussion here is a summary of this writer's answer to the question, originally published in Joseph M. Webb, Hub Symbols (Malibu: The Center for the Study of Christian Communication, 1983). That book owes many of its insights to two books by Kenneth Burke: The Philosophy of Literary Form in which Burke discusses, in a slightly different way, what he calls "ur (*sic*) or hub rituals" and in Permanence and Change (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1935); there Burke's major concern is with how and why human "perspectives" become so "fixed," and why, under certain circumstances, they do, in fact, undergo change.

The key to it is that we understand that the symbols that we learn are never, as far as their emotional charges are concerned, "created equal," even though we usually study them as though they are. Even within us, no two symbols, or words, or objects or whatever, will have the same emotional strength. So they must, even as we keep them discretely apart, be arranged within us in some way. They must have some kind of "order" imposed upon them within our heads if we are to cope well with them and with ourselves.

How, though, do we go about "organizing" our symbols so that they "hold together" and "make sense" to us, as different as they are and from such different places as we draw them? How do they somehow "fit" within us to give us our own unique "filter" for seeing and experiencing and acting in the world? And while this "ordering" process sounds deliberate and conscious, it usually is not; all humans do it and we do it whether we want to or not. We give our symbols their ordering by a unique process that appears to be part of the innate symbolic ability itself. We can visualize this by describing their arrangement around what we might call a "hub," like a wheel, with the wheel representing one's own unique symbolic universe. Within this large wheel are all the symbols--words, objects, people, actions, places, etc., anything--that I have "collected" as I have grown up, and that I still collect as I live life. This wheel is my "symbolic" world. The question, however, is what do I do with all of the symbols that fall within the boundary of my "wheel" or my life--since the symbols that fall outside of my "boundary" are not ones that I know; I cannot use them or understand them, even though others probably do.

The best evidence we have suggests that the ordering of our symbols is based on the fundamental primacy of the emotional charge over the cognitive meaning that each symbol contains or that we have come to put there. The

fact is that the amount of emotion or feeling, whether negative or positive, that we attach to each symbol that is ours is never the same for any two of them. The key, then, or the principle of our organizational structure, is this: the more emotion or feeling that we place in a symbol, negatively or positively, the closer that symbol lies to the center, or "hub," of our own individual wheel, or symbolic universe. Likewise, the less emotion or feeling we invest in a symbol, the farther it lies from our symbolic center or hub. We may diagram it like this:



The fact is that a certain small group of symbols come to be clustered at or near the center of our individual universe. These are still discrete symbols, usually held in a kind of tension, often reflecting space or discrepancy among them, but still tied together by virtue of the intense emotional investment that puts them there. These may be thought of as "sacred symbols"<sup>8</sup>--not in any overtly religious sense, but in the sense that they lie most deeply within us.

---

<sup>8</sup> This is a term that this writer utilizes in Hub Symbols, even though the idea itself springs from Kenneth Burke. Burke does not use the term "sacred," but he uses a whole series of alternative terms, such as "transcendent," "god-words," and so forth. Burke's discussions of these concepts usually surround his consideration of the notion of "hierarchy" and can be found particularly in The Philosophy of Literary Form; A Rhetoric of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); A Grammar of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969); and The Rhetoric of Religion (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

These are the symbols that we invest with a very special personal sanctity, the ones that we feel it necessary to guard, to protect. These are the symbols that we cannot allow to be derogated by someone else without our reacting intensely, with strong emotion or passion, to try to preserve the validity that we have invested in them. When we use these "hub symbols," or when we are in a place where they are used, they immediately call up within us the intensely-charged emotions and emotional reactions that we have attached to them. For the most part, hub symbols are like a two sided coin: on one side is the intensively positive emotion and on the other is the equally-intense negative emotion. Neither can be derogated or torn down for the one holding that particular hub symbol.

For example, if for an individual the idea of pacifism should somehow have become a deeply-held idea, a concept charged with intense emotion, then pacifism--indeed, the word "pacifism"--would be for that person a hub symbol. If someone then within that individual's company should suddenly and vociferously begin to extol the virtues of some recent American military campaign, the chances are extremely good that the one with the pacifist hub symbol would feel obligated to respond--and probably in a highly defensive, even argumentative way. In fact, that response would probably come in a startlingly spontaneous fashion. Some factors, of course, could cause that individual to stifle such an immediate response, but the feelings of instantaneous anger at the militaristic comments would be brought to the surface, whether they were expressed or not. That is the nature of hub symbol response. What would undoubtedly happen is that the pro-military person--if such staunch militarism were one of that person's hub symbols--would respond to the pacifist also in an angry manner, most likely with some heady name-calling, which, in turn, might be reciprocated as well by the pacifist.

We would say that pacifism as the hub symbol has two sides: pacifism is the positive hub symbol, highly-charged, deeply-buried until someone calls it up, and militarism is the other side of the symbol, the negative charge for that hub symbol. The way that the hub symbol pacifism is held, in both of its forms, cannot be torn down or violated or repudiated--whether intentionally or not--without the pacifist becoming intensely distraught and overtly responsive. An argument or more is bound to erupt in the presence of a vocal militarist. By the same token, though, if someone in the same group should speak up, extolling the virtues of pacifism, then our pacifist becomes immediately attracted to that individual, wants to meet him or her, wants to talk further, since it is obvious that they are going to find a strong bond in their shared hub symbol. It works both ways.

Despite the tension among these hub symbols--since they are often drawn from different symbolic worlds--these are still the symbols that, together, provide the "glue" for all of the rest of our symbols, the ones that lie "farther out" in our symbolic universe. We know those outer symbols and we use them as part of our living and working, but they are not invested with the emotional "load" of our "hub symbols," or of the symbols that lie closer to our hub. These outlying symbols, nevertheless, are the ones that we are able to connect with each other so that they give us a "unified" or "coherent" point of view. It is what we are calling the "hub symbols," though, that we use as "measuring rods" when we are faced with new symbols and the question of whether--and how--to "admit" those new symbols into our symbolic universe. If new symbols that we "learn" cannot be easily assimilated into the framework of our hub symbols, we will not admit them easily into our symbol system at all.

Our hub symbols, in essence, when they are held together, even in

tension, are what our "assumptions" are made of. These are the things that we "just believe" because we take them to be true, and intensely so. It is this collection of symbols that are, for us, not really discussable or debatable, at least not easily; and not without our becoming, as it were, extremely, even passionately, emotional. These symbols carry so much emotional weight for us that even our rational or mental processes are usually overridden by them. This means, for example, that when a subject comes up for discussion with others that touches firmly on symbols in our hub, we may choose to talk about them if we can, but our talk will be of an intensely emotional character rather than of an intellectual, dispassionate kind. Our feelings about those hub symbol topics will, in other words, show very clearly in how we speak. We will either argue strongly for or against that hub symbol topic, or our speech will have a biting, even a defensive edge to it as we speak. There is no way that what we say will not come through in an intense form.

These hub symbols, moreover, are so crucial to the overall structure of how we see and react to things that, when one or more of these symbols is forced to change, everything else in both our hub and outlying symbol system will also have to change in some way. This means that when a hub symbol is jarred from its moorings deep within us--almost always without our consent--other hub symbols are always forced to change their position or intensity somewhat and the ripple effect through the rest of the our symbolic universe eventually reaches every other symbol we know and use. The point is that these hub symbols form the anchor for our sense of "reality," the reality by which our lives hold together; and when one of these symbols is "damaged" for us, everything else in our lives is either injured or at least severely bruised.

These hub symbols are very real. They are not abstractions. They can be anything in which we invest an enormous amount of emotional content

whether we choose to do so or not. Usually they are words, specific words, strung together into specific patterns when we talk. When those words are used, or are used in particular ways or sequences, they produce intense emotions within us. But objects can be invested with intense emotional content as well so that a particular piece of dress becomes a hub symbol, either negatively or positively. Particular arrangements of furniture can be intensely invested, so that an altar or a communion table in a particular place becomes a strong positive hub symbol. This would mean that if that communion table should, in a given day, be moved to a new location on the chancel, the individual for whom that table's placement is a hub symbol would be overwhelmingly distressed, even to the point of leaving the sanctuary or the worship service.

Where do hub symbols come from? Like all symbols, they are learned. It is the symbol-using capacity with which we are born. In many cases, the hub symbols of our parents becomes our earliest hub symbols. Our parents, or those with whom we grow up, invest certain symbols with intense feeling or emotion. We more or less take over for ourselves the same strong feelings or emotions for those symbols that we find already in them. We can, of course, rebel against hub symbols when we encounter other symbols that claim our interest and emotional investment. That is why children of religious parents usually take on the parental religion themselves at a very early age. In high school or college, then, many of those same children may come to feel a strong sense of rebellion against those learned religious hub symbols. What usually happens is not that those hub symbols are thrown out, but, instead, the strongly positive hub symbols are turned over so that they become strongly negative hub symbols. Getting rid of hub symbols once we have them is an extremely difficult thing to do. We usually get rid of symbols in the hub only



by the working of time, as the intense emotion of some particular hub symbol decreases over time and the symbol "drifts," as it were, away from the hub. We also get new hub symbols by our associations with new friends and new groups of "friends." By some bent, we find ourselves thrown together with this particular set of people or that, we sense a kind of affinity and the hub symbols of that set or group we "decide," sometimes consciously, often unconsciously, to take on as our hub symbols. It is also true that we receive many hub symbols in very tangential ways, say from particular traumatic experiences, experiences that provide intense, unexpected emotional jolts within us. The divorce of a mother and father, for example, particularly if it comes as a surprise to a child, can become the creator of a child's hub symbol, one that may very well endure in the hub of that person for a long time.

Our hub symbols, and the whole symbolic universe which that hub constructs, in effect, holds together, provides the link between what we may call the symbolic "imagination" within us and the ongoing behaviors with which our lives are lived. At the center of the symbolic process is the principle that says we never behave toward anything around us on a one-to-one basis. As the American sociologist W. I. Thomas put it, "If we define a situation as real, it is real in its consequences."<sup>9</sup> That means that interposed between our sensual stimuli and our acting or reacting is the symbolization, the "interpretation." If a child sees a shadow that he defines as a monster, he

---

<sup>9</sup> W. I. Thomas, The Unadjusted Girl (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1923), 41-50. The idea is developed in various ways as well throughout Thomas's On Social Organization and Social Personality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966). This collection of Thomas' essays, published long after his death, is part of a series of books by those of what came to be called the Chicago School of Symbolic Interactionists. Thomas was a colleague of Mead in the mid-1920s. He is credited with providing the impetus for the idea of the "definition of the situation." With symbols, he said, one "defines" situations and then one's behavior is always on the basis of that symbolic "definition," rather than on the basis of the situation itself.

will behave as though he sees a monster. That, in fact, is the paradigm for all behavior that we know as human. If the fear of a monster is tied for that child to a hub symbol, that child's behavior in the presence of that shadow will be intense and highly disturbing.

This, in its simplest form, is at the heart of what we know about symbolization, imagination, and behavior. We sketch it here in order to explore what happens in the sermon, or the church, situation. What happens when we preach? The answer is that every single person who listens to a sermon does so with a fully-activated imagination, one constructed along the theoretical lines we have drawn. There is nothing passive about the one who listens to the sermon.

Two things remain in order to fill in our understanding of the sermon and the larger, liturgical setting. First, we will explore the symbolic "worlds" from which the hearer's symbols, including those that become hub symbols, are drawn. Second, we will put the sermon into the larger nature of the liturgy itself in order to grasp how sermon and liturgy interact.

#### The Four Symbolic "Worlds"<sup>10</sup>

The symbols from which the "universe" of each hearer--at least each hearer who has grown up in a Christian environment--is created come from what we will call four symbolic "worlds"--the world of the bible, the world of the liturgy or larger church setting, the world of society and the world of culture. Generally, these are divided into two divisions, the church and the world; but we can better understand each of these two if we subdivide them one more time. If we begin with the "church," two separate systems

---

<sup>10</sup> The pages from this point to the end of the chapter are an edited version of a major section of Burton L. Mack's manuscript, "The Gospel and the Gaps." They are drawn from Chapter 2, titled "In the Course of a Liturgy," and are used by permission of the author.

historically present themselves. Each has a "script" and thus each evokes a narrative sequence of images, actions and events of its own. As we just said, one is the bible and the other is the liturgy. Something in us, of course, resists pulling these apart even for analysis, sensing that the bible gives the script or pattern which the liturgy merely "reenacts." In the past, historians of religion have been impressed with this Christian persuasion. They have studied the extent to which it can be considered true, noting, among other things, the relation of the Eucharist (or Mass) to the Last Supper, the stations of the cross and the passion narratives of the gospels, and the iconography of the medieval cathedral. These are the elements that sought to replicate symbolically the entire biblical epic on portals, walls and altar pieces, thus setting up the well-known idea that myth and ritual need each other in order to survive and work. We now know that the myth and ritual theory cannot account for most myths and rituals as they occur among other peoples and religions. This means that the merger of the two in Christian liturgy (where the bible and the Eucharist are formally conjoined) is the distinguishing feature of that liturgy and may therefore give us a clue as to its function for the religion. It also suggests that, if separated, each probably projects an imaginary, or symbolic, world of its own, complete with its own "pre-packaged" hub dimensions.

The bible is its own symbolic world--of that we can be sure. This is not because we in modern times have learned about "history" and thus place the world of the bible in the past. It is also because the bible is a written text--a collection of symbols, words, objectively available. Each word is a symbol, and as the words are strung together, new symbols emerge, not only as patterns of language, but also by the construction of symbolic behaviors and events. To say the words, "Blessed are the meek" is to conjure up a symbolic reality, even

apart from the meaning or feeling associated with each word. Even that "saying," along with dozens upon dozens of others in the New Testament, functions as a symbol for countless people who hear that "line." The events described in the biblical language themselves are invested with enormous meaning and feeling by virtually everyone who decides to symbolically take the bible seriously. As we indicated earlier, at the heart of the bible's symbol system are its hub symbols around which everything else in the language and story revolve.

Ironically, to "preach the bible"--merely to say the phrase, "preach the bible"--is an intensely held hub symbol for many, many people, including preachers. Those three words in themselves are given meaning and feeling and the very act of saying them, "preach the bible," is to conjure up strong positive feelings for many--indeed, for many who are reading this essay. By the same token, to say something like "I want to preach, but I prefer not to preach the bible" is to conjure up an intensely strong negative reaction from anyone for whom "preaching the bible" is the only thing that preaching can be. The same thing can, of course, be said about phrase after phrase in the bible. What we are used to calling "proof texts," for example, are nothing more than phrases lifted from the bible, not because of their discursive, instructional value, but because those texts, those simple phrases or sentences, come to function for their sheer "hub symbol" value. To say them aloud and with passion is to induce cheers from an audience that invests them with positive hub symbol value in the same way that the preacher does. This, in fact, is often the way that the bible functions or is used, even by preachers who have an aversion to simplistic "proof-texting."

The liturgy also creates its own symbolic world, but in order to do so it must build upon the biblical epic. The difference between the biblical and the

liturgical world is that, whereas the bible takes the symbolic imagination back into ancient story time, the liturgy is designed to erase the sense of distance, bring the world of the bible forward and make it "come alive" in the present circumstance. The effect is that the liturgy creates a symbolic sense of "presence," often referred to as divine or sacred spirit, as if the "spirit" of the biblical world were eternal or "still here." In doing this, it makes the participant feel that the symbols found in the bible (aphorisms, instructions, behavioral models, "messages") are timeless, and that they are, in fact, being read or spoken to and for the hearer "right now." Elaborate theories of "biblical preaching" have been constructed precisely along such lines.

This symbolic world works because of three features integral to the liturgical design. One is that the sense of presence is created by calls to worship, prayers, hymns, doxologies, and various acknowledgments of the congregation that has gathered to do the liturgy. Another is that the liturgy clearly unfolds in a sequence of moves that comes to a climax when a response from the congregation is expressly enjoined. Traditionally, this takes place in the celebration of the Eucharist; in Protestant circles the sermon can and often does become the occasion for eliciting this response. A third feature of the liturgy builds on the sense of being in divine presence and moves the congregation through a series of symbolic "agreements" on the model of a covenant renewal ceremony. This structural feature of the Christian liturgy is overshadowed by the more dramatic reenactment of the sacrifice of Christ in the Eucharist. But the covenant renewal is more to the point. The notion of covenant is firmly rooted in the biblical tradition. It assumes a symbolic social anthropology, an ideal of justice, a divine authority, and a sense of ethical purpose for the social formation of the community. Any one of these can become the "hub symbol" system for the group's shared life. It is a perfect

script for a religion that works by keeping alive an imaginary world populated by people who desire to construct a sane and redemptive society. The liturgy functions as a ceremony of renewal by leading the congregants in: (1) acknowledging the sovereignty of God in the calls to worship and doxologies; (2) rehearsing the lessons of the past about rewards for obedience to this suzerain as well as the consequences of rejection or rebellion (both as read from the Old Testament); (3) listening to the terms of agreement laid down as the will, order, or law of the sovereign (as read from the New Testament, i.e., covenant, and clarified in the sermon; and (4) conforming one's agreements and loyalties to the royal dominion. This is done by accepting the symbols of the king's benefactions in the Eucharist and saying an intensely-charged "yes" to the "word of God" as clarified in the sermon, and so promising obedience. The terms of the agreement having been confirmed, the congregation can now be dismissed to reenter the "outside" world with the Christian world of the church ringing in its ears.

The structure and process of the outside, or everyday, world is also a complex mixture of many symbolic elements. But two major orders of it can be distinguished. These are, first, the symbolic order that mediates the network of institutions and patterns of activity that give form to a working society. Second, there is the symbolic order of the culture of a society, since its ideals, mythologies, ideologies, values and artistic productions are all, themselves, symbolic in nature. These social and cultural worlds are thought of as the "real" worlds in which Christians negotiate their lives with all who live in society. It is not usually understood as a conceptual or imaginary--that is, a "symbolic"--world. But to negotiate the real world requires that all parties share a host of symbols, many of them hub symbols. Among these are symbols relating to the ways in which people can be expected to act in given situations,

relating to the assumption that institutions not immediately visible as such are nevertheless doing their jobs, and certainly relating to the good sense that most of the furniture will still be there at the office and in place in the morning. So to live in a social, or symbolic, order with understanding and collective purpose requires that there be collective symbols, that is, symbols, even hub symbols, shared to a significant degree by all people in that system. That we think of our social world as "real," instead of symbolically-based, is our clue to the importance we attach to it. The construction of this symbolic society, this working society, comes very close to being the definition of the human enterprise itself. It is also in this world, from among the many symbolic worlds in which we find ourselves, where the success or failure of the human achievement finally registers and receives its examination.

The fourth symbolic world into which we are born--the second part of the "this world" dimension--is the cultural world. Culture in this case refers to the symbolic agreements reached in a given society about such things as the basis of honor, the recognition of good task and sensibilities to nuances of civility, humor, etiquette and admissible motivations. It also encompasses the shared ideals that evoke and govern art, debate, self-criticism, protest, hurrahs and celebrations. Since Americans generally have been reluctant to admit having a "culture" as such, our awareness of what we have and how it works is significantly truncated. We have not wanted a culture for several reasons. One is based on our historical adoration of the unconstrained individual. We do not really want to believe that anything we think or do is determined or made possible by the social system or its cultural agreements. Another reason concerns our cultivation of practical wit and wisdom. We have tended to idolize the can-doer and ridicule the "egghead." The egghead is a cliché that reveals our strong American streak of anti-intellectual and anti-

refinement tendencies. Finally, there seems to be an association of the idea of culture with the frivolous entertainments of the privileged class that look silly and extravagant to those who feel the burden of building a strong society. But even these negative attitudes toward culture as "high society" count as features of an American culture. It comes to expression in the contents of the "American dream," the enduring profile of the American hero, the pervasiveness of our popular novels and entertainments, our patterns of mobility and recreation, our voting habits, and our feelings about our wars, to name only a few signs that our flag is still there.

Cultures are manifest in symbols, which are used to create symbolic stories, or mythologies, which, once we have them, tend to set in as unquestionable assumptions about the way the world works or should work. This means, in short, that just as individuals have "hub symbols" at their core, symbols and myths are invested with intense emotion and feeling. These myths thus become "hub symbols" that, in effect, hold the rest of the symbolic system together for large groups of people. Cultures, in other words, have their "hub symbols" as well, those symbolic rituals and patterns of behavior, those ways of defining and acting that are heavily invested with collective meaning and feeling. These symbols become the "glue" that holds the society or culture itself together.

Ironically, as we shall see in a later chapter, widespread changes in living patterns in the United States, both intranationally and internationally, are now severely challenging the very idea of an American culture. The growing multiculturalism, a co-mingling and realignment of cultural symbols and traditions now threatens some of the most sacred American cultural symbols. Many American myths are under pressure as the system struggles to come to terms with new forms of ethnic plurality and pointillism. The



assumption, the myth, of the essential goodness of the American soul has been under fire since at least the late 1960s. Our sense of a society substantively different from, and superior to, the rest of the world is no longer based on a rehearsal of our illustrious origins as a nation and our manifest destiny. We are encountering in startling new ways the peoples from other nations and are now in the process of discovering that we do not understand them. Yet something in the American soul, or "hub," wants to hold onto a core of unique American cultural symbols, even if those symbols have to undergo revision as the character of the nation itself changes.

Granted, the symbolic "universe" inside every individual who comes into the church is comprised of more than the symbolic material from these four worlds. There are symbol systems which are more personal, more discrete, more idiosyncratic, the symbol systems of individual cultural or vocational strains of life in which we all move. For example, if one is a chemical engineer, that symbol system will also be part of the symbolic universe of that person; and, more than likely, the symbols of that profession will be hub symbols that govern that person's overall behavior. If one is a white female, an Afro-American, a women's studies major in college, a middle-management executive in an insurance agency or a seminary professor, all of these smaller symbolic worlds will impinge in a major way on the symbolic universe that one brings into the church setting. Realistically, nothing can be excluded from the symbolic material that may find its way into our individual symbol systems. And since these are often symbols lodged at the personal hub, they cannot in any way be overlooked. And yet what we are suggesting is that for all of us who gather with some regularity in church, four large symbolic worlds are invested with meaning and feeling in our lives: the worlds of the bible, the liturgy, society and culture.

### The "Gaps" Among the "Worlds"

Several things must then be understood as we set out to pull the dimensions of all this together into our theory of preaching the gaps.

The first is that these four symbolic "worlds" are distinct and always in tension, if not in downright opposition. The tensions are generally so much a part of our lives that we have learned to live with them, usually by overlooking the oppositions, even though we have other mechanisms, as we shall see. This has its counterpart in the fact that within our individual selves, symbolic tensions are a part of who and what we are. Each group in which we grow up--the day school group, the church group, the group of cousins and other nearby relatives, the group with which we play across the street or alley--each of these groups has its own symbol system, its own set of topics and, most important, its own language, with every word invested with meaning and feeling.

It is the equivalent of growing up in a home where a particular language is circumscribed by the mother and father. The child, though, spends several hours a day playing with a few older kids down the street; that group becomes an important group for the maturation process. One evening the child comes in to the dinner table to announce that he has learned a new word. This, we might say, does mother and dad proud, since they want their child's vocabulary to expand into new areas. They inquire, but when the word is said aloud, the parents become furious and, were it fifty years ago, the bar of soap would have been produced for cleansing the mouth. What the child learns quickly is what we all tend to know somewhat intuitively about language. The child learns that that is not a word to say at dinner or around his parents for that matter. But as soon as the child hurries back to his friends

the next day--the place where the word forms a key part of the group's cohesion--he is not only free to say the word, but without saying it he cannot be a part of that group. We learn that the tensions among our language, or symbolic, world tend to become effectively compartmentalized. We move from group to group, assimilating the symbols and language of each one, and then knowing that, when we are with this group or that one, we must use the language of that group; and we know very well that the language and symbols of one group cannot be carried readily from one group to the other. One of the constantly nagging human fears, in fact, is that we will find ourselves in a new group not knowing which set of symbols, which words, that we have assimilated are the appropriate ones for this group and which are inappropriate. So we usually try to be quiet until we make some judgments about that, knowing very well that the embarrassment, even humiliation, of symbol "violation" is difficult to overcome. The tensions among the symbols of our various "worlds" are real and very potent. We spend an enormous amount of time and energy trying to keep those tensions under control by staying tuned to "where we are" and trying to read the symbolic environments.

It is here, too, that we need to reflect back on the hub symbol process, since the way in which we actually deal with the multiple symbolic worlds is by increasing our emotional investment in some symbols and decreasing the emotional investment in others. This hub system, in fact, provides the key to our internal organizational scheme. Out of my four worlds, for example--the world of bible, liturgy, society and culture--some of the symbols will become hub symbols for me, to the point, in fact, where one of the four worlds will probably tend to become dominant over the others. For some, the world of the bible is the dominant world, the world that populates the hub; for others, the world of the arts, from the cultural world, will tend to be most heavily invested

with emotion. And so on. The tensions will remain strong among the symbolic worlds within, but the tensions are handled by granting a kind of "sacred" status to one world or another and simply allowing the other worlds to be part of my symbolic life.

What becomes so readily obvious in thinking through all this is that we live always with symbolic "gaps." While we learn ways to cope with the gaps, we never do it completely and seldom very well. More than that, just when we think we have the gaps between our symbolic worlds under control, something happens around, or even within us, that throws the "order" that we cultivate into disarray. And we are forced to start over again. What we propose here is a full recognition of these symbolic gaps and that the gaps themselves become the focus for what we do in the pulpit. Our symbolic worlds are fragile things, and we are constantly colliding with the symbolic worlds of other people. So the gaps are always present and they are, without question, the most disorienting dimensions of how we try to live our lives.

There is always a symbolic tension between the biblical world as imagined in the past ("then") and its actualization symbolically in the liturgy ("now"). The admission of a desire, encountered frequently in Christian meditations, to have "walked and talked with Jesus" might be regarded as a harmless witness to this tension, but it is profound in its symbolic orientation and disorientation. The frequent call that we have taken note of that Christians get "back to the bible" is a not-so-harmless bit of evidence that Christians struggle with this tension. A complex symbolic tension exists between what might be considered an ideal Christian ethos created by the liturgy and the actual experience of the congregation as an ongoing religious formation. The fact of conflict that arises when comparing the ideal Christian order to one's contemporary society is so well-known as to be almost invisible,

and yet it lies at the heart of almost every Christian experience. As for the symbolic conflict that exists between the world of culture and the world of the church, think of the battles that have historically raged over the public presentation of art, the publication of literature and public activities and ceremonies that Christians have generally found offensive. The difference between a society's cultural agreements or values and the society's practices is illustrated as well by the issues that constantly propel our systems of law and legislation.

Not many churches (in the sense of denominations) have recognized the tensions created by the gaps among the several symbolic worlds from which the Christian imagination is constructed, much less encouraged reflection upon Christian self-definition based upon such a recognition. The one exception seems to be the difference between church and world-at-large, a difference so fundamental to Christian thinking that the range of theoretical solutions to its adjudication bears an uncanny resemblance to the range of attitudes, programs and theologies that address the issue. For the rest, the gaps seem to have been denied or pasted over by artful ploys. In the case of the United Methodist church, however, an ingenious approach to the symbolic questions of authority may be seen as an implicit recognition of the differences that exist among the several symbolic worlds. It is the teaching on the four "authorities" upon which Christian belief, thinking and practice rest. The four authorities are scripture, tradition, experience and reason. As one can see, these four bear a striking resemblance to bible, liturgy, society and culture; together, they also bear more than a trace of influence from Romanticism and the Enlightenment combined with a respect for Christian tradition characteristic of the English reformation. Theologians in other reformation traditions have sometimes not wanted to give the Methodists credit

for more than striking an interesting compromise. Yet, to give each of the four authorities more or less equal standing was a daring and thoughtful move. By legitimating the authority symbolism in each of these areas, Methodism gave thinking Christians a truly liberalizing arena in which the tensions of the four symbolic worlds could be confronted and balanced.

What we are searching for, as we come through all of this, is a way to locate the sermon, a way to think about what the sermon does and how it is located within church life and Christian imagination. Preaching, as we have said, is a Christian act. It does, to some extent, draw on the biblical world, and so the bible finds its way into the process, as we shall see later. In that sense, it is a theological act, an act about the symbol "God," however God is perceived. It also belongs to the liturgy of the Christian religion just as dancing, for example, might belong to the primary ritual occasions of other religions. Whether as homily, meditation, instruction, polemic, apology for the faith, exhortation, or fundamentalist thunder, preaching a sermon is the dominant way in which Protestant Christians announce their presence as a congregation. The act of preaching itself is a highly symbolic liturgical act, just as the celebration of Eucharist or baptism is structured in ritualistic fashion, though this may sound strange to those accustomed to the notion of preaching as the volatile assertion of a strong public or charismatic figure. Preaching is also a social activity, a symbolic act that calls people together. The preacher as a person is invested with symbolic value by each person present for the hearing. The dress of the preacher is given symbolic meaning. The nature and placement of the pulpit is invested symbolically, as are the colors and the structures that surround the preacher. The language of the sermon, the sermon's form and tone--all of these things are also given symbolic meaning and "weight" by every hearer. In a sense, this means as

well that preaching is a ritualistic activity, something that is done collectively as a means of maintaining the collective. Apart from what the preacher says, to preach is to participate together in a set ritual act which has rules and patterns for its repeated conduct. Preaching is, in addition, a cultural act. It is art. It is drama. It is a living out of an aesthetic experience from which identity--not just collectively, but individually--is constructed and sustained. Preaching is, without doubt, one of the most complex human actions imaginable. In short, preaching is, above all and under all, a symbolic act, an act created from symbols, each of which individually and together has a meaning that is shared--in some cases as "hub" meaning--by those present.

The reason this is important is because, since preaching falls under all of these symbolic headings, the sermon appears to be a time and place for exploring, challenging and articulating the multitude of gaps that exist among these symbolic worlds. How do we connect the symbols, particularly if they are the potentially-explosive hub symbols? What is the relation between bible-past and liturgical present, and how, symbolically, can we be expected to move back and forth? What of the relationship between liturgy and society, the religious and the secular? What of the relationship between bible and liturgy and contemporary culture? The amount of sheer confusion that surrounds these questions is amply attested to by the turmoil within the religious world--a turmoil that produces deep alienation among those who consider themselves Christian and a sense of refusal on the part of most to be separated from such nonsense. Maybe the sermon is the place where the great symbolic gaps can be addressed. Maybe the sermon is where the hub symbols, both of individuals and of the collective, can be gently brought to the surface for examination. Maybe the sermon is the territory in which all of the troubling questions of our symbolic incongruities and extravagances can be

probed and wondered over. Maybe it is the sermon. Maybe we can preach these extraordinary gaps. Maybe the sermon can help people after all.

.



## CHAPTER 3

## Preaching, Ritual and Myth-Making

In a sense the so-called "hub symbols" that we explored in the last chapter are abbreviated statements of attitudes toward things--deeply emotional attitudes, to be sure, but attitudes, nonetheless.\* At one point in our discussion, we used the illustration of "pacifism" as a hub symbol. The word "pacifism" is enough to set the hub symbol itself into motion, to call the deep feelings attached to the word itself into full conscious play. We indicated then that should someone begin an adulatory discussion of militarism in the hearing of the strong pacifist, the pacifist's hub symbol would spring to life in a very defensive, even combative way. That is the nature of a word as a hub symbol. Yet, behind that word as the hub symbol is a whole complex set of ideas, beliefs, orientations and views of life and the nature of acceptable human behavior. For the intense pacifist, ideal forms of behavior are non-violent, at least in most instances. Beliefs that are held concern the ethics and processes of how to engage in conflict and "combat" and do so non-violently. Life tends to be viewed cooperatively, based on something good in every human being, even someone who might be considered an enemy. And so forth. The ideas and orientations contained within that single verbal symbol, the word "pacifism" are complex and could be spun out for some time, breaking from one idea to another. For the pacifist, moreover, pacifism is true. It is the only ethical approach to conflict, the only way that "works."

---

\* Portions of this chapter are drawn from Burton L. Mack's manuscript, "The Gospel and the Gaps." They are found in Chap. 4 of that work, titled "As the Practice of a Religion." The material has been edited and expanded by this writer. Mack's work is used here with his permission.

But this set of ideas about pacifism, held as they are within an intense emotional "juice," are statements, statements that, taken together, form a particular view of how things both are and ought to be. They comprise what we can call a "myth," in this case the "pacifist" myth. The problem in making such a statement, however, is that the word "myth" is itself a "loaded" word. It is a word that, itself, is a part of the hub symbol systems of many preachers. It is a negative term, one that is often held negatively with considerable emotion. We do not like myths. Myths are untrue. Myths are things without basis in fact. They are things that are, in a sense, "made up," and therefore are not only of no positive value; they are things that should be shoved aside so that truth--the opposite of myth--can be given its rightful place as the basis of our preaching.

What needs to be faced, however, is that myths are, in fact, positive symbolic constructions, just as the idea or the myth of "pacifism" is a positive symbolic construction. All religious ideas and hub symbols are positive symbolic constructions; indeed, pacifism is, for many, a religious idea. For some, it is at the core of religious insight and practice. But pacifism is still a myth, in the same way that militarism is also a myth. It has nothing to do with truth or falsehood per se. It has nothing, either, to do with right or wrong, even though moral and ethical judgments, judgments of right and wrong, are themselves part of each of the myths. A myth is a set of ideas, usually wrapped tightly around a hub symbol, a key word or expression, a set of ideas designed to provide a conscious, often story-like explanation for how things are and how things are supposed to be and work in a given area of life.

It is never a question of moving to a level of thought or intellectual practice where one can dispense with myth. That probably cannot be done, nor should we want it to be. Just as symbolization is the nature of the human

mind, so is symbolic myth-making and elaborating a part of the human psyche. It is what we are. So there is the capitalist myth, the socialist myth, the myth of equality, the myth of Eden, the myth of science and so on and so on. The question is not whether we need myths; the only question concerns which myth or myths will we use here or there to guide the living of our lives, the making of our judgments and the framing of our futures. We do not outgrow myths. We may change from one kind of myth to another, even convincing ourselves that one is a lower or a higher form of myth, or explanation of things. But the myths are still there. We can neither think nor plan our lives without them.<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, one of the most sophisticated forms of myth-making arises from a kind of religious impulse within us. It is difficult beyond measure for preachers to face the key implication of this: that in our preaching, in all our preaching, we are preaching myths and myth-construction. It sounds like it should not be. It sounds like we should all quit our pulpits immediately if that is all we are doing. We should get on to some more constructive work, some work that is based on truth and sound principles. And what about the bible, we want to know? Is it nothing but myth as well? But we ask the reader to let us hold those questions about the bible until a later chapter when we can give

---

<sup>1</sup> The study of myth is extraordinarily complex and is usually of one or two kinds. One is the study of myths themselves, a chronicling as it were of the great myths, and mythic repetitions, of past civilizations and cultures. The second is the study of the mythic process, of the making of myths as a part of the human species. We are here concerned with the second of these two concerns. While a number of twentieth century anthropologists have included the study of mythic process in their cultural descriptions and explorations, few have probed the subject as deeply as Ernst Cassirer. His book, Language and Myth (New York: Dover Publications, 1946) develops the notion of a "prelogical logic," a nonrational process of cognition that seems to lie at the foundation of all cultural formation. This idea is elaborated at length in Vols. 2 and 3 of his The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, to which reference was made earlier. Vol. 2 is subtitled Mythical Thought and Vol. 3 is subtitled The Phenomenology of Language.

the bible its full due. Suffice it for now that we try to face the clear reality of what our preaching does, in fact, do--and that what our preaching does is really worth doing--that it is worth doing, in fact, beyond all of our imaginings.

Myth-making, in short, is the process of living. It is the more complex and creative use of our symbolic abilities. From our symbols emerge our "hub symbols," those high-charged symbols that sum up and hold in check--or cause us, in some cases, to unleash--our deepest emotions and feelings. And those hub symbols, when unpacked, roll out into the myths around which we build our understandings, our values, our perspectives, our lives. Myths are more than personal hub symbols, though. It is the myths that ultimately function as the hub symbols of the collective, the community. Every community has its "stories," or "story," its shared values, its common ways of explaining the present and symbolically conjuring up the future. These are the society's myths. They provide, in a bedrock sense, the glue that holds the society or the community together. Again, religion falls squarely into this category, since religious myths are at or near the heart of every society's myth system. And preaching?--preaching becomes a major means by which the religious myths are interpreted, reinforced, replayed and constantly made accessible to people.

But there are mythic "gaps" as well. After we have worked through an understanding of the positive use of the concept of myth, along with its application to religion, then we shall turn to the gaps as a way to help us preach within the context of a mythic religious system. Two things, however, must be understood as we think about the relationship between myth-making and preaching. First, every society, like our own American society, is comprised of a complex set of mythic constructions; and the question we face

concerns the role that religious myth plays within that larger complex network. Second, we shall introduce the more common, and better understood, concept of ritual as it relates not only to religion but to myth systems themselves. Every myth system, in other words, develops its own unique ritual system as a way to give form and repetitive grace to its mythology.

### What Role for Religion?

The question, initially, then, is what does religion have to do with this complex process of myth-making, even if we are talking about twenty-first century, space-age societies? If we were to think of the conceptual structure of a society as the intricate interlocking of multiple symbolic myths, we might imagine the result as a kind of tapestry. The tapestry would be fabricated by interweaving the several systems of symbols and signs to create the terrain upon which the social and cultural worlds are built. This kind of social creation calls, then, for what cultural anthropologists know as a kind of legitimizing, a system of "blessing" or moral sanction upon the arrangements. This amounts to an appeal "beyond" the system itself in order to create a power of enforcement for the systems, values, judgments and authority constructions. Historically, whatever this type of legitimation, however it works, it is this which has been called "religion." It serves, in a sense--and it does so no matter what kind of social order exists--as a kind of embossment overlaying the entire, complex social structure with its processes and incongruities. And the embossment invariably takes the form of myths and rituals, which we have already defined as the imaginative ways by which we deal with the world and give it a kind of manageable cohesion.

These myths are symbolic, story-like explanations for how things "are," how they work and why they work as they do. The rituals are behavioral responses to the myths, responses that, in some cases, celebrate the myth's

power while at the same time reinforcing that power, both psychically and, for most societies, with some sense of magic as well. Some rituals and myths are umbrella-like, setting up the overarching paradigms for living--myths like capitalism or democracy, with whole sets of attendant rituals for celebrating those myths. Over time, those myths and rituals can assume the aura of "divine" explanations and behaviors; and enforcement of their acceptance and practice becomes a sacred duty. At that point, we reach what we might see as the second tier of "reality"--the moral, or the religious, tier--the tier of the "super-natural" riding over the realm of the "natural." Both are real, in a sense, even though their "reality" functions very differently. Underneath that large, religiously mythic umbrella, then--and every society has one or more of these--there are numerous derivative myths and rituals that form the tapestry of life; and whenever these derivative myths or rituals are invested with the power of the sacred or supernatural, they become a part of the religious dimension of life. Often, these myths and rituals are most crucial for the "intersections" of life, those points where changes take place or where disjunctions become most threatening. Here, then, religion becomes part of the mythic and ritualistic way of coping with, or controlling, those potential "breaks" in the social, institutional and cultural patterns. Ironically, these intersections or threatened disjunctures are not usually a part of the extraordinary, or "fantastic" points in cultural life, but come in the most common activities, the ones most taken for granted. Some theorists have suggested that these activities are noteworthy because they are so mundane, because they mark off the "natural" requisites for physical existence and communal life. Such would be the case with such things as: (1) inhabiting a terrain, marking a territory, and locating residence; (2) hunting, gathering, producing, domesticating, distributing and eating food; (3) gender coding,

pairing, mating, and generating and raising children; and (4) identifying social and authority roles, obligations and cooperative activities necessary for the working of the social collective as a whole. Anyone familiar with the archives of the study of comparative religions will recognize how one might come to such a conclusion. Religion on this model would provide a system of divine symbolic explanation and a means of acknowledging just how important and how far beyond normal human control these basic activities are for the well-being of the society as an organism.

Lest such an approach seem too far removed to enlighten the otherworldly preoccupations of the Christian religion, one may sort through the Old and New Testaments for the themes of place (land, temple, city, kingdom, body and heaven), food (from the forbidden fruit to the banquets in the kingdom) sex and ethics. A fine place to settle in for a study of their interrelatedness as fundamental issues for early Christian congregations would be Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church.

#### Religion and Social Symbolism

This approach is not, of course, assumption-free. It is based, at its bedrock level, on the view that humans create rudimentary social systems primarily in order to serve basic biological survival needs. A great deal of intellectual, ideological and political effort has been generated in our time by building upon this assumption. Social concern in a world of inequities, ecological concern in a time of exaggerated exploitation, and peace concerns in a time of wars and the rumors of wars all have assumed that societies can be called to task if they do not contribute to the survival of the species. Christian expressions of social concern during the last forty years have invariably appealed to just such a set of basic assumptions.

Yet basic biological needs are not sufficient to account for the complexity of social formation and the interest humans take in such elaborations. If all we wanted to do was survive, we should never have made it so difficult. The primary systems that structure even nonliterate and simple technological societies are much more complex than would be required if survival were the only interest. When humans develop even a single system of symbolic notation, even the simplest symbol as a form of classification, it soon becomes an elaborate, potentially exhaustive set of symbolic equations. With that, then, even simple activities become invested with much more lore and etiquette than would be necessary for physiological and biological survival. Merely pragmatic concerns cannot account for this phenomenon.

Eating food, to take just one example, is not thought of in any human society known to us simply as something one has to do in order to stay alive. It is, instead, an activity that combines a physical drive and an often multi-layered symbolic act. From the classification of an environment's best edibles through acquisition, sharing, preparation, tasting, service, table manners, commenting upon, comparing, cleaning up, every symbolic element in structuring the society is frequently brought into play to make sure that it is done right. Eating becomes a form of courtship, a means of conducting business, a form of ornate entertainment, a system for family maintenance and cohesion, as well as a form of religious expression. Eating for survival, in fact, is often lost in the midst of this particular occasion or that. The symbolic power of the "table" can be at the heart of elaborate social myths and rituals. Other such "common" activities, as well, are invested with enormous, and equally varied, symbolic powers.

The very complexity of symbolic social design indicates that huge investments of interest and ingenuity have been made in the structuring and



processing of human interaction and collective gathering. Some combination of symbolic and technological competence must be assumed in order to account for the many connections, distinctions and arrangements of things that even a single structural system can achieve, such as a system of kinship with its application of rules that govern marriage, descent, and identification within a clan or moiety. The elaborate organism that results when all of the systems are working together seem not to have as their primary purposes biological survival but simply the ongoing operation of a moral collective system itself. Social life is what a human collective, functioning symbolically, makes possible, and social life defines the nature of the human animal. Hence, social life for the human, creates its own interest; it cannot do otherwise. Humans become human by virtue of participation in their social worlds, their social relations. A kind of on-going relaxed busy-ness typifies the activities of human societies, despite the periodic crisis of management and failure. Still, humans live in an interactive environment of their own making, a symbolic as well as a physical environment, an environment that keeps them moving around, bumping into each other, talking, bickering, showing off, flirting, poking fun at each other, often deliberately hurting each other, as well as working together, looking out for one another, and caring. Societies are apparently designed to enhance the chances for interesting, if not always safe, human intercourse.

This can be illustrated by a brief sketch of the way in which nonliterate societies appear to mark their territories and so create their worlds. A complex process of familiarization, socially learned, must be presupposed. Landmarks, pathways, contours, areas, intersections, distance and limits come together in a kind of mental map. Characteristics of special places are symbolically invested and named. Stories are constructed and circulated to tell what happened there

to make the place special. Flora and fauna are symbolically located, classified and handled. Useful things are discovered and the times and skills best suited for their use are carefully worked out. This kind of information is assigned to some for safe-keeping and shared on appropriate occasions. Stories become elaborated into larger and larger tales that tell of the way in which useful objects first were noticed, hunted or handled. Foods are located and food activities are routinized and separated out for various symbolic occasions. Domiciles are given shape by orientation both to the terrain and to the round of social activity. Patterns of activity constantly shift the points of contact socially by changing the time and places within the territory where work and play occur. Borders are imagined and marked. Interdictions abound. Special places are specified where reminders of other times are made. And with these things, a world, a productive social world, is created in which people can live.

To negotiate such a world requires symbolic savvy, some intelligence, some learning (at least as the society defines it) imagination and memory, as well as ingenuity and interest in playing the system for advantage. When interests converge or conflict, or times and circumstances introduce changes in the environment or within the social organism, attention may be drawn to this or that feature of the social world. The symbols that locate such a feature on the "mental map" of the social world, and say it is important to the society's operation, can be subjected to study and review. Symbolic inventiveness can occur, either to resignify the feature by rearrangements within the imaginary world governed by the several systems of symbols and signs, or by strategies of behavioral and rhetorical modification that keep life interesting as a preoccupation that is both serious and productive, as well as knowingly playful.

This is the context in which the social anthropologist, then, understands religion, a phenomenon that every human society, bar none, creates and possesses even though it may take a thousand different forms. Religion comes to be defined as the product of this kind of imaginative endeavor. The myths and rituals of religion not only provide the umbrellas under which we live our symbolic lives, but they also find their focus at the critical moments, seams and junctures in the patterns of social life where things are most in danger of falling apart. Religious constructions, with myths and rituals, are thereby put upon certain relationships or activities that give them a kind of social control, that mark them as legitimate, dangerous or taboo. This means that on the symbolic map some activities that otherwise might seem to come quite naturally, may have no place at all; they may be closed off completely as inappropriate (such as sexual taboos.) These activities, ways of thinking or congregating may even in some cases be held as so strongly inappropriate that they would become negative myths or symbols lodged at or near the society's religious "hub," something that would probably result in strong sanctions against or punishments for such thought or behavior. Other such symbolic constructions, though--whether at the hub or not--may be internalized and used to explore and sustain elaborate meditations on the intricacies of human social relationships. This, for example, is one of the roles played by the Christian meditation on the crucifixion. It is an elaborate mythic construction which, because it is lodged at the Christian society's "hub," marks a large number of odd collective activities as legitimate. When new ideas, inventions and methods come along, they can be tested for their symbolic, mythic or ritual value against the patterns that are already accepted as "tried and true." They may, then, in some way be admitted into the system of

meaning by crowding out some previously held myth or ritual notion or by rearranging the existing mythic structure.

Thus the very process of mythmaking, ritualization and the analysis of social moments can be understood as a kind of self-reflective criticism at points where critical interests intersect, a way of thinking and articulating judgments about better or less better ways to see the society at work. When such judgments are shared--i.e., when myths and rituals are agreed upon over time and space and by a large number of people who engage in repeated rehearsal and practice--a familiar and inhabitable world results, complete with symbolic codes of labor, values, etiquettes, morals and ethics.

As for myths, they tend to arise socially in sets or cycles, indicating that humans think in episodes and delight in variations. When a set or cycle of myths comes to focus in a single imaginative figure or event, such as the crucifixion of Jesus in Christian mythology, one can be sure that the episode directs an entire social history and centers a rather complete imaginative world. Variations on the theme means that the episode has been agreed on as a nucleus of imagery crucial for visualizing a particularly social world, but capable of sustaining repeated and often varied meditations. A strong episode, one that is given preference in a mythic tradition, usually works to confirm a culture's dominant conventions, codes and values. A strong episode can also be used to explore the logic of a society's structures and patterns of practice, or to experiment with revisions of its codes and ideals, and to analyze the effects of social changes that occur or that may be considered.

#### The Construction of Symbolic Myth

The particular genius of myth, however, cannot be grasped by noting only its paradigmatic functions. For the narrative depiction of a social occasion or history in the mode of myth is never a description of the society as

experienced. Being a product of the human symbolic ability, myth is a symbolic construction. Thus, it draws on the material of the social world, as if from a distance, and with those materials, it carves, truncates, exaggerates, idealizes and becomes a "definition of" or "reflection upon" that social world. Usually the "distance" between material "stuff" and myth is created by locating the mythic episode in the past. The distancing is noticeable in the use of typical, representative, heroic and divine figures, and in the use of abstracted symbols, preterite time, and the fantastic circumstances that characterize most mythic modes of narration. Thus the imaginative order of things offers both a reflection of and a definition of the social world from an obtuse, far-off viewpoint. It renders a contemporary social world familiar, as it were, by depicting it as already having been inhabited by those who lived before, usually long ago and far away. But the world bears the same shape nonetheless; at least that is the implicit assumption of the mythic mode. Myth is the means, in other words, by which any given individual or generation learns that it has come into a preexisting world. The instruction is biased in favor of depicting the world as if the present state of affairs were given, established from the beginning, and lived in fully by all who had gone before. The social world thus becomes the arena within which life can be imagined, a place where work can be accomplished, encounters negotiated, dangers perceived, conflicts resolved, joys shared and so forth. Because it is observed by reflection, however, and not, as it were, directly, the sense of its being "observed" is also created. The world created by the mythic imagination becomes the norm by which the events and patterns of practice that actually prevail in a society are judged.

Thus there is always interplay, a process of complex but never ending interaction, between the actual world of a society and the mythic world of that

society in which people live. Myth-making is a mode of thinking that uses a symbolic, or imaginative, field of play to stabilize a social world even while exploring options for enriched meditations, social changes and difficult resignifications. There is a tendency in myths to grant complex and ambiguous episodes special privilege and to exaggerate the extravagant features of a scene or an event. This shows that myths are not meant to portray a society at its "average" or "actual" levels of messy operation, but to provide a symbolic screen for both long-term projections and experimental sketching to keep a society thinking about its health, well-being and options.

Rituals, on the other hand, publicly display the cultural agreements a society has reached. Rituals share with myth the characteristic of displacement from the normal round of activities. They achieve their distance differently, however, not by locating an imaginative world somewhere in the past or in some "once upon a time," but by marking off the boundaries of special times and places within the actual life cycle of the society. Instead of relying on words to evoke a narrative imagination, rituals use a full complement of both verbal and visual symbols to focus public attention on the performance of some particular action. The action is usually common to the round of activities customary for the society, but it is charged with unusual significance, unusual symbolic meaning, by means of its repeated reenactments. In addition, rituals may be seen as actions that are, themselves, invested with intense emotional meaning, apart from what they actually "stand for." That is, the action of the ritual is not instrumental in any way; it does not have any "end in itself;" it does not accomplish any goal or have any prescribed "outcome." Instead, the ritual is an action that is its own end. The meaning of the ritual is "in its doing." When the action is over, the symbolic meaning ends; it evaporates; it is put away; and the only way to recreate the

meaning is to repeat the action. Ironically, this is what makes so much play--of both childhood and adulthood--take on a ritualistic cast. Despite the fact that many games have a sense of "winner" and "loser," the object is to "enjoy" the process of playing. When the game is over, the sense of fulfillment that the game as ritual provides comes to an end; and it will not return until the game is repeated in the same way that it has always "been played." In rituals, and in ritual "games," to participate in the action is its "reward," whether one is named "winner" this time or, maybe, next, or whether the participation permits one to enter into a new domain of life or activity, into, that is, new rituals.<sup>2</sup>

Ritualized activities are understood by anthropologists as constitutive for social formation, and they are, themselves, frequently the occasion for effecting social change. Thus, boys become adults, girls change their life status, marriages are contracted, war parties are formed, food gets harvested in its established cycles, kings are installed, temples dedicated and so forth. Rituals mark the occasional events of a society's cohesive round of activities.

---

<sup>2</sup> The study of ritual is, at one level, so tied up with religion and liturgy that it is somewhat difficult to think of it apart from such a setting. And yet to bring a broader and somewhat more rounded understanding to its dynamics, it is important to understand that ritual is a human activity--a positive human activity--that has been studied extensively in non-religious settings. Earlier, we discussed the tradition known as Symbolic Interactionism. Over the last two or three decades, this tradition has produced a number of important studies of human ritual behavior. Three may be noted here as forming the basis for some of this discussion. One is Homo Ludens by Johan Huizinga (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950). That book analyzes the play of both children and adults as an essential form of ritual behavior within the process and sustenance of communal life. The second is The Symbolic Uses of Politics by Murray Edelman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964). In this book, Edelman examines political forms--forms of appeal, behavior, speech, and so forth--as elaborate rituals for connecting oneself to large numbers of impersonal voters; it is a rich and valuable study. The third is Symbolic Crusade by Joseph Gusfield (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963). This book is an analysis of the American temperance crusade, one which sees the entire process as an elaborate ritualistic "acting out." There is a sense in which all of these books, which are related in orientation and research procedure, throw a bright light on the processes of religious ritual.

They create intervals such as years, seasons, months, weeks, days. They tend to the times of transition such as the rites of passage: birth, puberty, marriage, construction, installation, role designation, undertakings and death. Rituals remind a society that, though the structures of its world had better remain stable, human life within its bounds is chancy, mortal, generational, limited and therefore eventful.

Features that mark a public performance as ritual include the observance of special times, care for calendrical constraints, the use of highly-charged collective symbols and the concern for accurate replication. If the action of a ritual is compared with its analog in the world of the everyday, it can be viewed as a deliberate shift to a slower speech that stretches out the display of specific features of the action. Ritual also involves the evocation of both the mythic and the social worlds as coterminous frames of reference and requires the deliberate playing of roles, with their own stylized actions, dress, masks and learned lines. Rituals use a behavioral mode to gain imaginative distance from the social world, recall and reexplore actions and events regarded as constitutive for the social order, and recreate social sensibility by turning spectatorship into participation. Ritual occasions are therefore more than effective and noteworthy events. They serve as ideal enactments of activities held to be critical for the well-being of the social project. By means of a slight shift in perspective, ritual performance can become a paradigm for any and all actions in which humans encounter one another and engage their environment. Rituals reveal a preoccupation with encounters that involve such things as recognition, negotiation, transaction, reciprocity and transformation. Rituals explore the social moments and human encounters where things can go wrong, where missing the mark



would ruin relationships, where liminality calls for extra-precautionary moves.

Taken together, myths and rituals can be understood as the condensed wisdom of a culture. Wisdom in general is gained by watching one another, taking note of typical consequences for this or that initiative, and making these observations stick in formulations that are memorable. Thus proverbs, maxims, and riddles distill the collective experience of a people in patterns and memory forms that can easily be recalled and used to interpret the occurrence of other moments and events. Formulations of wisdom such as these can then be collected, sorted through, arranged by theme, and used for thoughtful and instructional purposes.

The telling of stories thus belongs to the human enterprise of social formation, since the stories themselves take on the quality of mythic construction, as any group which informally gathers for a rehearsal of a day's events will illustrate. The simplest stories of an episode of labor can be told with great embellishment and fascination; and the telling of stories seems to be a part of the enterprise of human symbolization itself. Everyone can spin a yarn, as the child's game of starting a story, letting someone else pick it up, and someone else, and someone else, and so on, readily demonstrates. As time goes by, some stories touch particular human nerves and become elaborated and passed along. They become memorable and may be recalled on social occasions when reminders of a people's past, identity, work, heroes, villains, characteristics and achievements are in order. Memory and symbolic imagination converge finally in the process by which a people's wisdom, accounts of the world, histories, legends, epics and mythologies are selected, collected and polished for collective rehearsal.

Myths and rituals of this nature are found throughout the breadth and width of a people's collective life experience. Such large myths and rituals can be found in the world of politics, where political heroes assume mythic proportions and the repeated act of voting itself takes on a ritualistic cast. They can be found in the world of business and commerce, where certain ways of money-making and accumulation become mythic in their perpetuation and where the processes of record-keeping and investing become ritualistic in their precisely reiterated formats. They can be found in sports and athletics where legendary figures and contests take their place in some reified pantheon and where enormous, faceless crowds gather for the cyclical World Series or Super Bowl games. They can also be found in religion, where the great myths of God and God-embodiment, myths of redemption by blood and so forth form the stuff of ageless theological reflection, and where the ritualization processes are more refined and perpetual than probably in any other domain of human activity. A society's system of mythic and ritualistic symbols can be thought of as a manifestation of its persistent fascinations, a display of its best physical, cultural and intellectual refinements, a panoply of its self-assessment of ideals, perfections and strengths.

While the term religion can refer to a specific area of human activity, as we have just indicated, distinct, say, from politics or sports or commerce, it is also true that religion, in many ways, provides the central paradigm for how the cultivation of the collective imagination works in its creation of social symbols. Historically, we know that religion is not particularly threatened either by thinking or by the process of fantasizing ideal worlds. In fact, it is a combination of these that goes into the creation and sustaining of the large social symbols that both hold cultures together and permit them to change. Both reason and fantasy are required. This means that the creation of a

mythical, ideal order of the symbolic imagination is integral to the collective experience of human social formation. Thus gaps between the imaginary, or mythic, ideal and the actual experience of social life are normal.

There is no question but that people are conscious of the lack of "fit" between their society's symbolic ideals and its actual practices, even though that recognition is not necessarily overt or pondered over regularly. The rule is that societies do cultivate ideal social models, that these models are summed up in the large mythic symbols and rituals around which that society revolves. The rule, too, is that everyone in that society learns to live with an actual order of things that is far from the ideal. Fierre Bourdieu provided a remarkable example of this in his description of the "collective beliefs and white lies" surrounding the ideal of parallel-cousin marriage among the Kabylia in Algeria. All insisted that their children had married parallel-cousins even though everyone knew that it was not exactly true. So the lack of fit between the ideal and the actual does not keep people from putting the best possible construction upon their actions. The "gap" actually makes it possible to do so. How humans manage to live "in the gap" gets to the heart of the matter, as far as this study is concerned. As Jonathan Z. Smith has pointed out, the interesting thing to study is the difference between what people say they are doing and what they actually do. Gaps are, to be sure, always a part of living and life, but saying and doing are always quite different things.

#### Mediating Between Ideal and Actual

What it comes down to, in a sense, is that religion may be perceived--at least at one critical level--as trying to mediate between the ideal and the actual by marking the distance between the two. At the heart of religion is the moral and ethical impulse, the impulse that tries to know a "higher law" of some sort, that posits a world beyond this world, even knowing full well that such a world

is a figment of human imagination. There is in religion an almost universal sense that what exists is not what could be, that there is something in the human species that desperately wants to, and knows it can, rise above the animal levels of the physical. And however it conceives of it, religion tries to draw up patterns of ideal things, of things that smack of utopias, but at the same time things that fall upon humankind as a kind of never-ending challenge to be what is not yet. Religion, then, tends to go beyond what is imagined to what could be. It wants also to create time and place for people to experience the distance between what is and what is not yet. It further wants to create a setting for making possible and even stimulating reflection on both the real and conceptualized ideal world, the world of the mythic.

Religion, that is, wants to guide reflection toward a kind of collective assent to some other "above" realm, a realm of mythic-making. It wants to do this, moreover, while providing concrete motivation and even direction for living in the real world "as if" it were ideal. It is this constructive function of religion that most cultures emphasize. When viewed as the supporting link between the status quo and mythic symbols, religion can be described as rhetorical. Religion objectifies a society's symbols and energizes discourse about its structures and patterns of life. Myths and rituals illustrate the clever turns of language, via metaphor and metonymy, used to make the connections among activities of interest and the symbols of their social importance. Analogies become cliches that govern associations between sex and labor, for instance, or warring and hunting, rearing children and domesticating plants and animals, and constructing buildings and creating poems. The constructive function of religion is not to be thought of as harsh, oppressive or dogmatic. Religion facilitates social intercourse by making sure that it stays interesting.

Religion can also facilitate critical thought when, for instance, the lack of fit between the symbol system and the real state of affairs creates discomfort and confusion. Judgments have to be made. Lack of fit can be experienced when cultures collide, when social histories introduce change, when rituals get sloppy or even when the sages elaborate the society's myths to reified levels too far removed from obvious connection with the world of mundane human experience and interest. And judgments can fall either way, as cultural critique or social program. In general, a society expends its intellectual energies in the attempt to overcome the lack of fit and strive for a sense of correspondence. This means that slight shifts and rationalizations on both sides of the gap will mark the first attempts at reconciliation. But if the fiction of "fit" can no longer be maintained, something, of course, will have to give.

Christianity is not an exception to the rule that religion is rhetorical and that the rhetoric can sometimes work constructively (enculturating) and sometimes critically (as prophetic judgment). Rhetoric is simply the art of persuasive, or symbolic, construction and construal and such symbolic construction and construal is exactly what humans have to do in order to craft a society. Christianity is, in fact, largely a religion of construals: note the place of judgments, missions, programs, preachments and visions that it projects for and upon the church and the world. Its public performance is deliberate and oriented to issues as are all rhetorics. And it certainly has a large inventory of theses, examples, analogies, pronouncements, precedent cases, and expostulations just as do all rhetorics. So if social construction is what humans do, and thinking about it is what religion is for, the question for Christians is whether Christianity is any good for thinking about the social state of our world today, whether Christianity can face its own mythic

constructions, evaluate them and make them honest and useful in the program of helping people create a sane, long-lasting human society. The answer, if give one we must, is yes, it probably can--though there is room, it should be said, for doubt. But how are we going to find out? How and where will Christianity as myth and ritual for our time be seriously thought about and publicly tested? The answer to that question is, in the sermon, in the preaching. And with that, in a 'sense, we try to set our sights on a new vision and role for the sermon in the church--and in the world.

## CHAPTER 4

## The "Gaps" and the Multicultural Person

Thus far in our study, we have been concerned with the nature of individual imaginative and collective "bonding," and particularly with the role of religion in both. It is difficult, however, to grasp the nature of the contemporary preaching dilemma if we do not take account as well of the ways in which arrangements of global cultural and ethnic patterns have changed over the past few decades. It is these changes, in fact--changes that have produced what we now refer to as multiculturalism--that help us to understand how the dynamics of cultural bonding we have been assessing are, themselves, changing.

How has the world changed? How have cultures changed? There have always been "gaps" between cultures; we know that. But have the cultural and ethnic gaps changed? What are the new configurations of cultures--as well as the new social and personal arrangements that result--that now confront us? The world has indeed changed in profound ways over the last few decades. There is a kind of surface sense for describing the changed world "system" in which we live. For example, we know that while there is now a semblance of peace globally, the localized fires of hatred and civil war around the world present a specter of bloodshed and inhumanity as volatile as any one can imagine. We know that while national barriers have fallen in the most unexpected places, terrorist factions, some of which probably have access to tactical nuclear weapons, are stronger and more menacing than ever. We know that while racism seems to be easing in some parts of the world, it appears to be flaring with subtle new ferocity in other parts, even in places where it was already supposed to have dissipated. Moreover, there is virtually

nothing in any part of the globe that escapes our attention, thanks to the new powers of international satellite media. That alone introduces a keen volatility in both situations and peoples, since "explosions" in one part of the globe always seem to take their toll in some other region as well.

Since the world has moved, people have changed from what they were even a hundred years ago. In this chapter, we will examine the strikingly new "cultural blur" that confronts today's preacher. There have always been gaps between cultures, nations and ethnic collectives; in fact, enormous gaps. These gaps have, in the past, appeared virtually insurmountable. But the nature of the modern world is such that even these "gaps" have changed significantly. In some cases, they have narrowed. In other cases, many of the ethnic gaps have disappeared, or are in the process of disappearing. But it is not so much that the gaps have or have not remained; it is, instead, that the very nature of these gaps have changed. We do, in fact, preach in a multicultural world, and our preaching must somehow take account of that multiculturalism. But how are we to understand the changing nature of world cultures, religions and ethnic arrangements? What are the changes and what are their implications? A new kind of cultural individual has evolved (or is evolving) from this multicultural milieu. How, though, do we get below the clichés of the news headlines so that we can understand the nature of the "new person" who sits before us as we preach? Only if we can somehow get our hands on that new persona can we think clearly about how to reconfigure, and how to reinfuse, our preaching task so that it becomes important and meaningful again. We still are called to "preach the gaps," but a whole new set of cultural gaps need to be confronted and taken into account in our sermons.



At the root of all of our efforts to describe the "new world" with which the third millenium after Christ opens, lies the fact that the old world of sharply divided cultures and nationalities is disappearing. We have come to call our world multicultural, using that term to indicate our awareness that the ethnic, cultural, economic, and nationalistic borders have blurred, if not broken down completely. What used to be a very large world has grown frighteningly small. What used to be a world with plenty of space for everyone has become a very crowded world. What used to be a world in which progress was steady (when it could be charted at all) has become a world shaken by not one or two or three, but by countless revolutionary lurches, all within the space of six or seven decades of this century. It is these revolutions, moreover, that have drastically changed the cultural contours of our planet in ways that no one could possibly have predicted even a hundred years ago.

It is not even enough, though, to call ours a multicultural "new world;" it is necessary somehow to try to understand what "multiculturalism" means if we as preachers are going to grasp what our emerging task of preaching is to become. That is where we must, of necessity, begin our reassessment of preaching, by focusing on what has happened to our world. And what has happened is not just that cultures have been forced to lie closer and closer to one another, which they have; it is not even that cultures have been forced to interact, which they have. It is, in addition, that these cultural proximities and interactions have created a new "multicultural individual." It is this new person, this "product" of multiculturalism, that requires our keenest attention. This is the new person to whom we must preach. So our task, at the outset, is to chart in some fairly concise way the progress and nature of multiculturalism,

indicating how it is bringing into being what amounts to a radically different kind of human persona.

### Some Origins of Change

In a sense, the shrunken world of the last half of the twentieth century began with a revolution in weaponry, with the bomb that made global annihilation a distinct possibility, if not a probability. But it was only one of a whole series of human revolutions that more or less changed our perspective on where and how we live together as humankind. The revolution in food production brought about by the development of new chemicals and climate control places the possibility of ending world hunger consciously within human grasp. The revolutions in medical diagnosis and treatment, in genetic control and even in sanitation technology have dramatically extended longevity and the overall quality of life in virtually every country of the world. In human terms, the feminist revolution leads the way as women take their places, finally, among the world's leaders, not only in government but also in business, religious and creative capacities. Even the larger "human rights" revolution continues to expand as in nations around the world the idea catches on that everyone has a right to food, work, dignity, health and freedom. In none of these areas is any of the full potential achieved, but the ideal has tended to take root and the blossoming of actuality is well underway.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> There is a wealth of information concerning the nature of these modern revolutions. Among some of the better studies in which the revolutionary character of twentieth-century America is examined are Joyce Kolko, American and the Crisis of World Capitalism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974); Norman Birnbaum, The Crisis of Industrial Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1969); Gerald D. Nash, The American West in the Twentieth Century (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973); Robert Heilbroner, The Making of Economic Society (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972); and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Economic Justice for All (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1986).

Two twentieth century revolutions, in particular, though, appear to have provided the most potent "engines" for the global reconfiguring that can now be readily identified. They are the revolutions in communications and transportation. Since World War II, television has become an international phenomenon, reaching literally into every nook and cranny of the planet. It has had, and is having, two major results. First, it is exposing every isolated culture of the world to the dominant Western cultures, particularly the consumerist culture of the United States. The glitter of the Hollywood-style culture, smiling in the recesses of every indigenous outpost, is appealing beyond belief. The second result of the spread of Western television has been the stirring of not-to-be-denied curiosities about those dominant cultures, since the screen becomes the peephole through which the larger, "outside" world is glimpsed.<sup>2</sup> These are the same curiosities that sent the explorers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries hunting for new lands and buried treasures. They are curiosities that will not be satisfied unless one goes to "see for oneself."

When the post World War II transportation revolution is added to this, the groundwork is laid for the making of a startling new world, a world configured as never before. Mass forms of rapid transportation now encircle

---

<sup>2</sup> Again, the number of studies that describe this media internationalization are too numerous to deal with here. Three outstanding studies of this "world window," though, can be mentioned for someone wishing to pursue the subject. The first is Television and Society: An Inquest and Agenda for Improvement by Harry J. Skornia (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), written with a critical eye and an international orientation. Despite its age, it is still remarkably timely. The second book is Television: Technology and Cultural Form by Raymond Williams (New York: Schocken Books, 1974). This is only one of Williams' many books on the history of cultural change as it relates to international media. Far and away the best of these works, however, have come from Herbert I. Schiller, a communications and cultural scholar. Of particular importance is his book, Mass Communications and American Empire (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1969). It is Schiller who developed the well-known concept of "cultural imperialism."

the globe. Air lines enter and depart from every major population center in virtually every country on the earth. International shipping of self, goods and belongings is quick, easy and often relatively inexpensive. And with international telephone and satellite communications, one cannot go anywhere on the planet and be "out of touch" with where one "came from." So, when one or two or a small group from a distant culture venture out into the world of a larger culture, their communication back home of what they have found is inevitable. The result, in almost every case--whether the end result is permanent or temporary relocation--is a gradual pulling out from distant cultures into one of the dominant Western cultures, if not physically, certainly psychically.<sup>3</sup>

To make as clear as possible both the dynamic and the eventual outcome of this for the creation of a new cultural world, it is useful to examine briefly cultural migration over the past 30 to 35 years in two forms: the intra-American form and the inter-American form. In both cases, we may take the state of California as our template since it serves well as a microcosm of cultural reconfiguration. Moreover, what has happened in California, particularly in the central region around Los Angeles, has now happened in virtually every metropolitan city in the United States, to say nothing of many of the other great cities of the world.

#### Intra-American Cultural Movement

Even though the western migration of the United States is usually dated from the Gold Rush days of the nineteenth century, since the turn into the twentieth century, more than 50 million Americans have poured across the

---

<sup>3</sup> For an outstanding collection of articles that explores virtually every aspect of this subject, see Alan Wells, ed., Mass Communications (New York: National Press Books, 1974).

Mississippi River and made their way west as far as they could go.<sup>4</sup> At least three strong cultures were already present in California before that influx: Spanish-Americans, Mexicans and, to some extent, American Indians. What came west with that American migration was a kind of supreme confidence in the frontier values and in the European stock from which the hearty "Americans" had forged the eastern and middle states. What also came was a deep disdain for the existing cultures of the region, as well as an unrelenting drive to exploit whatever natural resources could be found. The stage was set for an ongoing clash of races, religions and ethnic origins, as well as of cultures.

Then, from the late 1950s through the decade of the 60s, thousands upon thousands of southern blacks began a new migration west as well, also heading for Southern California. Some estimates put the number who moved into the state as high as two million. The black population of Los Angeles alone jumped from about 400,000 to almost 750,000.<sup>5</sup> In fact, seeing the surging black population, the California state legislature in 1963 enacted what was called the Rumford Act which prohibited landlords from engaging in racial discrimination in rentals. The following year, the California Real Estate Association sponsored Proposition 14 to overturn that law. In November 1964 the proposition was approved by voters by a two to one margin. Not coincidentally, the frustration over Prop. 14 was vented in the destructive Watts Riots the following summer. The clash of cultures had turned explosive.

By the early 1960s, more than a million Chicanos, individuals of Mexican-American descent, were concentrated in California, Arizona, New

---

<sup>4</sup> Nash, 217-18.

<sup>5</sup> Nash, 286.

Mexico, Colorado and Texas.<sup>6</sup> Most were in urban concentrations, the largest of which was, again, in Southern California. Moreover, the Chicano population was the lowest of any ethnic group on the nation's economic ladder. The economic and social problems facing Chicanos were aggravated by intense cultural conflict, largely because the language of the Chicano was Spanish and among younger Chicanos in particular the resistance to learning English was deeply-felt. As a result, Chicano barrios, or ghetto areas, became large and well-defined. In metropolitan areas like Los Angeles, the barrios became fortress-like cultures, viewing outside cultures, even other ethnic cultures, as bitter enemies. The language barrier was the point of demarcation.

During the 1960s, though, white Southern California culture began to take unilateral action against the barrio culture. It embarked on "urban renewal" and on other programs that not only undermined, but in many cases actually destroyed, the barrios, forcing thousands upon thousands of poor Chicanos into even deeper poverty as it forced them into other, more cramped, living conditions. The most destructive action was taken in 1961 when the city of Los Angeles bulldozed Chavez Ravine, one of the city's oldest and largest barrios to make room for new freeways, parking lots and Dodger baseball stadium.

During the decade of the 1960s, as well, a policy initiated by the Kennedy Administration relocated to urban areas thousands upon thousands of American Indians. By 1970, their number had risen to more than a quarter million.<sup>7</sup> It had been hoped that the movement from reservation to city would help the acculturation and integration of young Indian populations, but in

---

<sup>6</sup> Nash, 270.

<sup>7</sup> Nash, 280-81.

fact the forced migration actually sharpened cultural conflicts, moving their poverty from the country to the urban areas.

Several American Indian leaders objected strongly to the forced migration, lobbying Congress intensely. As one writer described it, "the United States was like an enemy that had scattered the Indian people and divided them against themselves. The Red Power Movement hoped to unite them, partly through its emphasis on racial consciousness that would enable Indians to close ranks and unite for defense of their rights. The goal of the New Indians. . . was to retain and adapt Indian culture so as to partake of American economic affluence, but without losing the Indians' unique cultural heritage and identity."<sup>8</sup> In fact, though, it was not to be. The affluence of white America only accentuated the poverty of American Indians. The clash between Indian and white values was more profound than anyone anticipated. It was, moreover, a clash that, in various parts of the country, would disrupt both cultures, white and Indian

#### Inter-American Migration

Ironically, the decade of the 1960s also saw profound change in the patterns of foreign immigrants into the United States. The root of this change can be traced to the passage in 1965 of what was called the Immigration Reform Act. In a sense, the act was meant to place controls, even limits, on immigration into the country, but its larger effect was to dramatically change the character of American culture itself, particularly--again--in the western

---

<sup>8</sup> Nash, 283. While Nash's book remains the definitive overview of this history, other books also prove useful for their historical sketches. For example, see Raymond F. Dasmann, The Destruction of California (New York: Macmillan, 1965) as well as Robert Conot, Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), a far-reaching analysis of events leading up to the Los Angeles Watts Riots of 1965. Also for historical background, one should consult Paul Jacobs, Prelude to Riot (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).

United States. The act provided for admission each year of 170,000 immigrants from Europe, Asia and Africa, with a maximum of 20,000 from any one country. It also provided for the entry of 120,000 additional people from the western hemisphere, with no maximum from any single country. But these limits did not apply to relatives of American citizens, and with the reunion of families a stated priority of the law, about 100,000 additional such people were admitted in the first few years after the law's enactment. All told, in the decade and a half after 1965, an average of almost a half million immigrants entered the United States every year--legally.<sup>9</sup>

The downside of the Reform Act, however, was that it called attention to an enormous, though uncounted, influx of illegal aliens into the country, creating what one writer has called a jarring discrepancy between the law and existing practice." What emerged by 1980, then, was not only a new urban poverty class of those who had entered the country illegally, but, more profoundly, a deep division between legals and illegals that has only intensified over the past decade.

Far and away the most important change in American immigration has been the shift in immigrant cultures entering the country. After the Reform Act was passed, immigrants from Europe declined steadily until, by 1976, more than one-half of all immigrants came into the United States from seven Asian and Latin American countries: Mexico, the Philippines, Korea, Cuba, Taiwan, India and the Dominican Republic. To put it in perspective, in 1969, three immigrants came from Europe for every two from Asia; by 1976, seven years later, two immigrants came from Asia for every one from Europe.<sup>10</sup> The

---

<sup>9</sup> Richard Polenberg, One Nation Divisible (New York: Viking Press, 1980), 282.

<sup>10</sup> Polenberg, 282.



bottom line was that the immigrant communities, particularly in California cities such as San Francisco and Los Angeles, that had fallen into decline in the years after World War II suddenly sprang back to life. The problem, though, was that the new Asian populations were jammed into the same or even constricted geographical areas, meaning that they were hit with new depths of poverty and rapidly-rising disease rates. Despite this, however, many new Asian immigrants were professionally or technically trained. As a result, by the late 1970s and early 80s, Asian Americans were enjoying a higher standard of living than the indigenous "immigrants," whether black, Chicano or American Indian.<sup>11</sup> Yet an assimilation between new immigrants and the existing indigenous populations, particularly the white population, did begin to take place. This can be seen in the new marriage laws that were passed, leading to a sharp rise in interracial marriages. Forbidden in California until 1948, marriages between white Americans and new Asian citizens skyrocketed in the mid-1960s. By the mid-1970s, half of all Japanese Americans were marrying Caucasians.<sup>12</sup>

#### Evaluating Cultural Configurations

A simple sketch of these patterns of intra and inter migration and immigration makes startlingly real the dynamic of an American--and even international--culture, or cultures, with which the twenty-first century will be launched. It is not just that the United States is a melting-pot. It had been that for several centuries. It is that a new culture is, to a large extent, taking shape, one whose outlines and patterns have become clearer and clearer as the century has progressed toward its conclusion. The fact is that nationalisms all

---

<sup>11</sup> Polenberg, 284.

<sup>12</sup> Polenberg, 285.

over the globe have been, and are being, undermined, and that a new kind of internationalism has emerged, one based on the redistribution of populations themselves. But what conclusions can be drawn from the kinds of empirical data that are generally available for inspection? Three conclusions at least may be suggested as we try to get our bearings on this new multicultural world.

The first is that we have seen in this century, and are still seeing, the urbanization of culture globally. This began in the latter years of the nineteenth century and a host of sociologists chronicled its opening phases. Max Weber characterized the change as a transition from "traditional" to "rational" society, with the term rational referring to the emergence of an impersonal authority structure, one based not on human relationships but on "laws" calculated to meet certain "ends" or "goals."<sup>13</sup> Emile Durkheim considered the same phenomenon, discussing the transition from what he called "organic" types of social solidarity to "mechanical" types. Durkheim is particularly well-known for carrying his study of the transition into the area of "suicide," compiling remarkable observations about human toll of the emergence of the new urbanized culture. George Simmel looked at the same thing from yet another view, focusing on the effects of urbanization on the small groups by which human identities are conferred. His studies of changes in human dyads and triads--families and friendships--are still provocative and enlightening today. Virtually every culture on earth, no matter where it is located, became urbanized during those years; and charting the effects of that

---

<sup>13</sup> One of the best introductions to the work of these well-known social theorists, as far as these "guiding" concepts are concerned, is The Social Bond by Robert A. Nisbet (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970). This book devotes considerable attention not only to these central sociological concepts but also to the personalities behind those concepts.

urbanization gave birth, to a large extent, to the discipline of sociology itself. The vast majority of people on earth now live in massive clusters where the basic necessities of their lives are centralized and made available through various collective mechanisms. Metropolitan sprawl is now the model for late Twentieth century life, regardless of the nation or culture. The city is the new tribe.

This century's most widely-used academic designation for this phenomenon is "massification," or the creation of the "mass society."<sup>14</sup> Human beings as individuals have become blurred. Put another way, this has resulted in the loss of what at one time was seen as an "individualistic" ethos. Whether on the American frontier of the nineteenth century or in the multitudes of indigenous peoples scattered in their localities around the globe, it was generally understood that their lives were lived as individuals, having meaning of some sort either from their own personal conquests or from cultures that provided their unique identities. In a pivotal essay titled "The Theory of Mass Society," published in 1956, Daniel Bell summed up the effects of this urban "massing," noting that it

brought men into closer contact with each other and bound them in new ways; the division of labor has made them more interdependent; tremors in one part of society affect all others. Despite this greater interdependence, however, individuals have grown more estranged from one another. The old primary group ties of family and local community have been shattered; few unifying values have taken their place. Most important, the critical standards of an educated elite no

---

<sup>14</sup> The concept of "mass society" is well established in American cultural literature. Several outstanding anthologies of articles may be consulted to explore these materials further. For example, one may see Mass Culture edited by Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (New York: Free Press, 1957). While an older book, most of the classic pieces defining the territory of "massification" theory are there. Also of value is Culture for the Millions? edited by Norman Jacobs (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957). In some ways, the seminal work in this area remains The Politics of Mass Society by William Kornhauser (New York: Free Press, 1959). Many of the concepts of the "mass society" literature were developed by Kornhauser.

longer shape opinion or taste. As a result, mores and values are in constant flux, relations between individuals are tangential or compartmentalized rather than organic....Because of all this, the individual loses a coherent sense of self. His anxieties increase. There ensues a search for new faiths.<sup>15</sup>

Bell noted that the social massification, urbanization, has now all but destroyed individualism, whether the American or the indigenous variety. The loss of this individualistic ethos has been lamented by scholars of modern culture throughout this century. As the historian Vernon Parrington put it, "In the welter that is present-day American militant philosophies with their clear-cut programs and assured faiths are wanting, and many feel, as Matthew Arnold felt fourscore years ago, that they are dwelling between worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born. The old buoyant psychology is gone and in the breakdown and disintegration of the traditional individualism no new philosophies are rising."<sup>16</sup>

Psychologists and sociologists alike have attempted to chart the relationship between the physical massing of populations in this century and the psychic results. By and large, they describe not new collective sources of identity--which on the surface would seem to result--but, instead, a destruction of individual identity itself, a sense of human alienation, a close physical proximity resulting in psychic distance between people.<sup>17</sup> This is a kind of distance that is not able to confer personal identity or connectedness.

---

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Bell, "The Theory of Mass Society," Commentary, July 1956, 77.

<sup>16</sup> Vernon Louis Parrington, The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America: 1860-1920, 3 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), xxvii.

<sup>17</sup> Numerous studies are available that pursue this general theme. Among them are Donald G. Baker and Charles H. Sheldon, Postwar America (Beverly Hills: Glencoe Press, 1969); Donald N. Michael, The Next Generation (New York: Vintage Books, 1965); and Technology and Man's Future edited by Albert H. Teich (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972).

What results is the society that Robert Nisbet has described as a vast, impersonal, mechanical aggregate of discrete voters, buyers, sellers, and so on, comprising separate, individual units of a population rather than parts of an organic system.<sup>18</sup> One's proximate culture, in short, no longer provides individual identity, so even the last vestige of individualism, whether theoretical or in practice, is finally wiped away.

The full impact of this phenomenon, however, can only be grasped if the second--simultaneous--modern global cultural change is identified. What we have seen in our brief "case" analysis of cultural movement in and into the United States, and particularly Southern California, may be described, to use a term from the art world, as a "pointillization" of cultures. Pointillist painting is a process of creating new color and color illusion by placing dots or various sizes of this color and that onto other fields of color. From the merging of a color field and the addition of color "pockets," as it were, new colors emerge. Every color is, in a sense, distinct on the canvas, and if one studies the work up close one sees the distinctions clearly; and yet when one backs away the colors themselves blur into new patterns and effects. In this sense, even the "collective" is not what it seems to be. In other words, cultures placed upon other cultures or in the midst of other cultures result--not in the loss of the individualistic ethos alone--but in the loss of the collective ethic itself. What we have described as having taken place gradually through this century, and in a sharply accelerated fashion over the past 35 years, is the process of cultures being overlaid and overlaid again within the midst of existing

---

<sup>18</sup> Robert A. Nisbet, The Sociological Tradition (New York: Basic Books, 1966). This book, unlike Nisbet's The Social Bond, to which reference was made earlier, confines itself to extensive discussions of the key concepts in the history of sociological theory and research. It, too, makes a very useful introduction to social thinking.

cultures. But in this overlaying process, cultures themselves become frayed and even fractured. They lose their own distinctiveness, even as a color dot does when it is laid down in the midst of a color field. And the color field, the cultural field, itself, also loses its distinctive quality as a result of the cultural "collective" laid in its midst. This "restructuring" of cultures, this layering of cultures upon cultures, this pocketing of cultures within cultures, is seldom, by its very nature, a peaceful configuration. The overlays themselves create tensions, often with violent results; and when the heightened expectations of "newness" are added to this mix, the new cultural arrangements have far-reaching implications. Here, in fact, we are probably at the core of the eruptions that have plagued American metropolitan areas, large and small, since at least the mid-1960s. The old collectives, based on homogenous cultures and communities, have not disappeared quietly.

The irony of this phenomenon is that both individualism and collectivism as we have known them in the past are both effectively eliminated. But if individualism, with its sense of rugged, frontier-style autonomy, is gone, and if collectivism, with its sense of a strong, shared identity, is also gone, then what remains? What takes the place of these things that appear to be the only two sides of the coin? This is the question that requires our keenest attention. No easy answer can be found; and yet in the history of American sociological thought we may turn for the seeds of a useful and provocative direction.

#### The New "Marginal" Person

The migration of European cultures into the United States that burgeoned during the latter years of the nineteenth century reached something of a peak during the 1920s, in the years just before the Great Depression. City after city on the eastern seaboard and through the

midwestern states saw the influx of whole ethnic communities. It was the first full playing-out of the cultural pointillization of American cities. In Chicago, where the number of ethnic settlements was second only to New York City, a group of young sociologists and social psychologists associated with the University of Chicago set out to study first-hand the dramatic changes taking place within the city.<sup>19</sup> They wanted to conceptualize what was happening to a culture that was, in a sense, being "invaded" by new cultures--but the invasion was of this pointillist type, where cultures were staking out their own well-defined territories within the existing culture.<sup>20</sup> Led by Robert Park, these scholars developed a remarkable body of studies--and theories--of cultural change, theories that are still profoundly striking in the creative way that analyzed what was happening. In fact, search as we might, we will still not find anything more helpful than Park's studies of urban immigration and reconfiguration.

Ironically, the heart of Park's sociological orientation to the new urban culture was historical. "When. . .the walls of the medieval ghetto were torn down," Park wrote,

and the Jew was permitted to participate in the cultural life of the people with whom he lived, there appeared a new type of personality, namely, a cultural hybrid, a man living and sharing intimately in the cultural life and traditions of two distinct peoples; never quite willing to break, even if he were permitted to do so, with his past and his traditions, and not quite accepted, because of racial prejudice, in the new society in which he now sought to find a place.

---

<sup>19</sup> For a summary of these studies, see Robert Park, Ernest W. Burgess and Roderick D. McKenzie, The City (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

<sup>20</sup> The paradigm for this orientation to social research was provided by Frederick M. Thrasher's The Gang (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927).

He was a man on the margin of two cultures and two societies, never quite interpenetrated and fused.<sup>21</sup>

This became, for Park, a description of what he saw happening again and again in the culture of Chicago. It was, first, a pointillist cultural situation, as culture stakes out a territory for itself within the city's existing cultural milieu. And despite the tensions created by such cultural overlapping and layering, the city handled the pointillism. And yet, because of the nature of the overlapping itself, the people within those cultures, at least after one generation, began to noticeably change. For Park, that medieval Jewish man became the prototype of the new person, the new cultural persona, the one who was emerging from the pointillist cultural mix that was the new Chicago of the twentieth century. Park named this person "marginal man," the "first cosmopolite and citizen of the world."<sup>22</sup> He also, perceptively, called the person the "new stranger." In this new blended personality, Park perceived effects as "profound and disturbing as some of the religious conversions" in William James' Varieties of Religious Experience. Park focused, at one level, on the distress of this new personality type. Initially, he said, it was the "conflict of the divided self" resulting in a profound "disillusionment," or what he referred to as "spiritual distress." This is the person, Park wrote, "who lives in two (cultural) worlds, in both of which he is more or less of a stranger," characterized largely by "spiritual instability, intensified self-consciousness, restlessness and malaise."<sup>23</sup> Over time, Park observed, the distress of being "on the edge" of two or more cultures simultaneously becomes permanent, and at that point the new person emerges. Both cultures--and for Park there could

---

<sup>21</sup> Robert E. Park, On Social Control and Collective Behavior (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 205.

<sup>22</sup> Park, 205.

<sup>23</sup> Park, 206.



be more than two--become subsumed within a single personality, not easily or cleanly, but with a kind of inner jaggedness that must somehow be assimilated. And over time, even the "marginality" of this process disappears, as more and more people find themselves in the same "marginalized" situation. The marginality, in fact, then becomes the mainstream. Marginal individuals find themselves increasingly in social situations where the same processes are at work in other people. They become part of a larger effort to "create themselves anew" from the pieces drawn from more than one culture.

Two things are particularly important about the findings and theoretical constructs of Park and his colleagues in sociology at the University of Chicago. The first is the insistence that this new "hybrid" person, even after multiple generations, is still in an uncomfortable psychic position. There is no "melting pot," as such. One simply learns, both individually and culturally, to live with the tension of marginality that arises from never being fully accepted in either of the cultures that one has internalized. The second thing is that, whereas the marginalized person was confined to three or four American cities in the 1920s and 30s, now this "new person" does not live in any one place, in any one city anymore, in the United States or around the globe. The assimilation of more than one culture has largely become a function of both national and international mass communication. While various races and cultures can easily, and often legitimately, complain about not being sufficiently or accurately reflected in media programming, the fact is that our awarenesses and understandings of cultures other than our own are shaped largely by television and film. No one is any longer isolated from other cultures, nationalities or religions. The media is the new window on the world--and that is as true for those who live in Tokyo, Calcutta or Tel Aviv as it is for those in Chicago, Cleveland or Miami. The media of mass communication

forces us, as it were, to assimilate cultures that are not our own. We may not always do it willingly or even knowingly, but we do it nonetheless; and we do it, by satellite, in whatever culture we live.

The new person is a hybrid, then; not happily, and seldom comfortably. But there is no choice about the hybridization, given the social, economic and cultural realities as we have sketched them historically. Cultural confluence requires it, even when there are people who want desperately to maintain separate cultural autonomy and identity. The new person must learn to live with a certain amount of lostness, a sense of push and pull whose resolution must await the new generation, or the next. This new personality, this marginal person, now infects everyone to some extent, regardless of culture, and regardless of cultural stability or mobility. Everyone has become or is become marginalized. Everyone must deal with the conflicts of cultures and with the inner turmoil that ingesting and assimilating those conflicting cultures can bring.

It is this marginalized person, and the culture of marginalization--the ultimate hybridization of culture, as it were--that replaces both individualism and collectivism. To be part of the modern world is to experience the frustration and disorientation that cultural marginalization brings. Realistically, there are no new cultures in this marginalized area, or within the marginalized person. The old cultures have either broken down or are breaking down. And the modern marginalized personality is experiencing the brokenness. What new cultural configurations, substances or symbolic transformations might emerge from the joint living arrangements of multitudes of marginalized individuals cannot even be imagined as we open the door into the twenty-first century. This is the new world of marginalized people--people whose lives are forced to incorporate not one cultural

orientation, as it once was, but more than one cultural orientation, not one set of ideological assumptions, but more than one, not one religion, but more than one religion. In work situations, living arrangements, settings for leisure, worship and commerce, the cultural lines are blurred, and those who must embrace the blur are different people than anything seen before in human history. The marginalized people are embracing the task of creating new personalities for themselves, personalities that can hold their own internal cultural variables in tension.

### Playing the Cultural "Gaps"

What we have described, and have tried to provide in some historical framework, is the new cultural world in which the church finds itself. It is no wonder that everything has blurred. At least sets of what we can now describe as "cultural gaps" can be readily identified--gaps that call out, as it were, for the close attention of the preacher, not just as something to know or be aware of, but as something that should, over time, be systematically addressed in the sermons that one preaches.

The first cultural gap is the one that arises from the new, reconfigured borders between pointillist cultures in, say, every metropolitan city in the world. The cultures are still there, with their customs and mores, their languages, their senses of pride; and the walls around those cultures still exist. Those in the dominant, or existing, cultures are frightened of the newly-"imported" cultures. They want the walls up to keep their cultures from being infringed upon, and most leaders of the new pointillist cultures that have "moved in" want--despite their "migration"--to preserve their own cultural integrity. Because the walls between the cultures are invisible, the clash of cultures is an ever-present danger; and it is not uncommon at all--as recent history in our cities shows--for violence between the newly-aligned cultures

to erupt. The problem is that the maintenance of cultural integrity, even in this pointillist system, is a worthwhile goal. A culture has a right to remain its own culture. It has a right to a place for its language and customs, those things that can, in as full a measure as possible, be passed along to the next generation and the next. In fact, it is always a tragedy when a culture becomes swallowed up by a larger culture, or when one culture is able to blur another one into a kind of neutrality. There is a need, in fact, for the church to become a party to cultural maintenance, despite the danger of cultural clash. There is a gap here, one that the preacher, significantly, can help to foster while, at the same time, knowing the volatility of such cultural walls.

The second gap arises as these cultures in opposition are forced to deal with each other, when they must, somehow, learn a language of acceptance. This is the gap, not of "stay out," but of "let's get acquainted." It is the gap that has the first flower of openness built into it. It is related to the first, of course, but its dynamics are strikingly different. Here, it is not a matter of seeing and seeking to preserve cultural integrity, or cultural difference, but of seeing the gap between cultures as something to be bridged--not to eliminate the separate cultures, but to assist in helping one culture accept, as it were, the integrity of neighboring cultures. This gap is quite different when looked at in this way. The idea is not--it can never be--to get rid of individual cultures so that one large new culture can emerge; that happens, in fact, far too often. The idea is, however, that only when those of one culture can accept, and even empathize with, those of nearby cultures can some semblance of social peace and harmony exist. Focusing on, and preaching concerning, this cultural gap is an important part of the church's task.

The third gap is that "internalized" one that we discussed a moment ago. It is the disorienting gap created within an increasing number of individuals

who find themselves straddling more than one culture, internalizing more than one culture. These are people who operate in a kind of cultural isolation; and their numbers are increasing. These are people who, by and large, must live with hyphenated cultural designations: Asian-American, Mexican-American, and so forth. This gap, too, is not foreign to the church, and, indeed, it shall become increasingly a part of the church's multicultural life. This, too, must be addressed by the pulpit. It is a gap that cannot be avoided in a program of preaching.

We are only now beginning to understand the nature of multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity. We are coming to realize that, despite the common wisdom of this century, the United States has never been an effective "melting-pot." The term implies a kind of smooth blending that now, in retrospect, we know was neither smooth or well-blended. The cultural tensions have always been a part of our lives, boiling up here and there into full cauldrons of hatred. Because the multicultural configurations have become much more complex and interlaced over the past few decades, there is every indication that the multicultural animosities may well become deeper and more intense in the years ahead. The church, the preacher, has a role to play, an opportunity to speak in the midst of this multiculturalism. The gaps are there, but they must be focused on and addressed by the pulpits of the land.

## CHAPTER 5

## The Bible and the "Gaps"

Our study thus far of human imagination, of myth, ritual and culture has been an effort to lay the background for understanding what happens in the preaching situation, with preaching taken as a central aspect of the Christian religion.\* We come now to Christianity's "book," the bible. In virtually all studies of preaching, the bible comes first. It is taken as what is to be preached. Preaching is supposed to be biblical preaching; and, for many, if it is not biblical preaching, it is not preaching at all. But if we attempt to rethink, as we have tried to do throughout this study, the purpose and nature of the act of preaching, it is necessary as well to rethink the role of the bible in the pulpit. It requires, in a sense, an alteration in our view of the bible--a view that, in many ways, must be more honest than we are accustomed to being. The bible, however, cannot be understood apart from its overall place within the history of Christianity. So we begin there, with what Christianity has been, how it has "conducted" itself, and how it has created the bible as its core document.

Almost from its beginning, Christianity has been a mission-driven religion. For hundreds of years, in a world of disparate cultures and nationalities, Christianity has been out to "convert the world" to its one truth about the one God and so make possible the one world order called the kingdom of God. This imperialistic mainspring at the Christian heart must--or so Christians have long believed and practiced--negate the validity of all other

---

\* This chapter, while edited by this writer, is essentially the work of Burton L. Mack. It appeared as Chapter 3 of "The Gospel and the Gaps." It was entitled "With the Bible in the Background." This revised version is used here by permission of the author.

religions of the world. Now we are becoming painfully aware that Christianity is, at best, a relative religion that must somehow take its place alongside other religions, and within the new multicultural configuration of societies and their peoples. Christianity, in short, can no longer practice imperialism in a world of blurred, and blurring, cultures and religions.

For more than 200 years, Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, have thought of their mission to the world on the model of colonialization and the building of empire. Colonial expansion, for its part, was thought to be the purpose and mission of Western, or more recently, American culture. But despite massive global reconfigurations, individual cultures throughout the world are still making every effort to retain some measure of cultural autonomy and integrity, even as cultural intermingling takes place. And many nations and cultures in every corner of the globe are now saying "no" to all forms of Western imperialism, even the religious variety. So, while Christianity has circled the world with its salvation-carrying missionaries, the plan of "winning the world" to Christ has not worked, and most Christians are facing the reality that it will not. Moreover, not a few Christians are finally coming to the realization that the root of the problem lies in the very desire or drive to "win the world" that seems to permeate all of Christianity itself. An imperialistic Christianity simply does not fly well in a multicultural world.

#### The Bible and Supernaturalism

Ironically, it is this missionizing drive within Christianity that has fired its preaching for centuries. And since the Reformation, the missionizing and the preaching have had as their foundation the bible. While the emphasis on the bible has waxed and waned over various eras since the sixteenth century, the emphasis on the bible cannot be exaggerated. In the Protestant tradition, the importance of the bible as text has come to be invested with an

almost supernatural and singular authority, and this despite an understanding of the historical origins and development of the canon. It has also been pulled away from its original dependence on the liturgy to the point where it now stands alone not only as the final, but as the sole arbiter of faith and practice.

When the reformers left the Catholic church and turned their backs upon its highly refined liturgy of the Mass, other ways of evoking the biblical world had to be found in order to enable the Christian imagination to function. Since it was the bible that they were able to carry away with them, the bible had to assume functions that had earlier belonged to the liturgy with its iconography and rich symbolism. So, in Reformation hands, the bible came to serve as the sole script (sola scriptura) for evoking the biblical world, rehearsing the epic, creating a sense of divine presence and announcing the divine instructions as charter agreements. Thus the bible needed the sermon; and in the process the narratives of the epic became events to be verbally rehearsed and proclaimed. Preaching was the way in which the mythic events of the Christian epic were brought to bear upon the present time. In the preaching, the divine events and actions were calculated and announced in a way that would render judgment and redemption within human history. Add the reformers' emphasis on divine written, or biblical, authority to counter the pope; on written, God-given verbal truth to counter papal dogma; on individual reason for reading and thinking to counter church tradition, along with the faith of hearing the bible to substitute for ritual, and the bible readily became overloaded. Where the function of liturgy had been truncated or even disallowed, textual fetish blossomed. "Handling" the texts of Scripture became the new ritual, replete with formalistic features to the bible's display, its reading, its translation, its proclamation in the sermon, and its reception by the listener as a somber act of faith without which no one could claim to be a



Christian. What emerged was a bible loaded with an enormous heap of new baggage that Protestants could not afford to give up, but which became the carrier of the new authority in the absence of the Catholic liturgical evocations.

Thus it is not surprising that in many circles of Protestantism, particularly in reformed circles, among those who have been most critical of Catholic and liturgical forms of Christianity, the bible has taken on a aura of a divinely-inspired book in which propositional truths about God, God's will, God's plans for human history are said to be recorded and thus revealed. It is this view that turns the bible into the familiar prop of the Bible-thumping preacher. In fundamentalist and many evangelical churches, this sense of supernatural bible leads to stern, doctrinaire beliefs and preaching, heavily laced with a rigid, individualistic conservatism. This results in preaching that looks for a verse here or there as an anchor for a particular moral standard, for some reported saying of Jesus as a forever-binding Christian ethic, or for some proof-text as a way of creating a schematized belief or practice. The pronouncements, moreover, are almost always served up in a sauce of heavy emotionalism.

Christians in mainline traditions find the behavior of those with such a view of the bible a public disgrace. On the surface of it, such an expectation from the literature of antiquity is silly, at best. Yet the tradition of a divine bible is so thoroughly engrained in Protestant tradition that it is virtually impossible to disavow it, and anyone who thinks to do so is immediately suspect, if not treated as outside the Christian fold. Yet, as bible scholars and most preachers know, even to read the bible itself in a systematic way, understanding it as a collection of ancient historical documents, is to see the breadth of the problem of a "divine book." One readily knows that in trying to

appropriate the bible for any modern use, the bulk of the material in it must, quite honestly, be set aside as either being wrong or having little, if any, relevance for a twentieth century world. Indeed, the recognizable ideas and important preachments--those elements that invariably rise to the surface for preaching and teaching--only surface here and there, and then only when highlighted in some fashion by the template of a modern theological system as a guide. So it should not be surprising that the bible is seldom, if ever, actually read as part of preaching in conservative or fundamentalist circles of Protestantism. It is underlined, scratched, rubbed, torn, thumped, thrashed, sifted and construed in order to find some phrase here or there that reflects one's own theological or ideological persuasion. But what is Protestantism to do?

The fact is, though, that even the efforts to revitalize preaching in all of the mainline Protestant seminaries and churches cannot escape from the pull of the bible as a document. While it is clear that most current theories of preaching do not share the conservative's dogmatic, propositional view of the "word of God," they hold onto the bible as the dominant source of the sermon with a fundamentalist's tenacity. Few current theories of preaching, though, make any effort to spell out their reasons for starting with a biblical text. They simply assume that to be preaching, what is said must be "biblical." In fact, biblical hermeneutic has become quite sophisticated as a result of the last generation of biblical scholarship. For example, at its outer edge, meaning is no longer sought in the actual ideas, truths or systems of belief discovered in a text, but meaning is now found in the text's existential effect, its parabolic function, its narrative resolution, its psycho-social directives or its rhetorical conjurings. This sophistication was learned from the humanistic disciplines of the academy and, in contrast to the literalistic views of the bible, these are

truly humanizing approaches. This is because there is much more appreciation for the ways in which humans imagine, view, understand and evaluate their worlds.

### Protestantism and "Biblical Preaching"

Despite this, all of the most influential current theories of preaching, bar none, assume that the sermon must be biblical and that the bible is the special and sufficient source for all of the insights that make Christianity what it is, insights without which Christianity would cease to be, if you please, Christian. It is this assumption that motivates and generates the enormous expenditure of effort that preachers invest in consulting the bible while preparing sermons. It is this assumption that keeps the very notion of "biblical preaching" from being questioned--whether biblical preaching is defined as "proclamation," or as "overhearing the gospel," or as "witness" or by some other homiletical designation. It is this assumption that makes it ill-mannered for congregants ever to challenge the validity of what the "biblical" preacher says. If the preacher is preaching the bible, the deed is done.

The turn toward "biblical preaching" in American culture over the past fifty years was taken by degrees, one suspects, as social issues became increasingly confusing and people seemed more and more distant from the pulpit's concerns. From the latter decades of the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth, though, two parallel patterns can be charted. First, it was a period in which the most influential preaching in America was "social" preaching, with sermons by preachers like Harry Emerson Fosdick aimed at both social and, later, psychological problems. At the same time, though, a second trend picked up, that being that the church's influence in American culture declined significantly; denominational memberships fell;

people had other things to do. For many, the problem with the churches was that they had been getting the wrong kind of preaching. Overwhelmingly and across the Protestant board, the call was for a "renewal" of preaching. And in America after World War II, the neo-orthodoxy of Europeans like Karl Barth hit with full force. Protestantism would rediscover the bible. The bible would be the "word of God." The bible, and the bible alone, would be preached. And the new "biblical preaching" would save the Protestant day. Even the Methodists yielded on their traditional recognition of the fourfold nature of Christian authority (consisting of Scripture, tradition, experience and reason balanced in a "quadrilateral"). They actually made a public announcement that the bible should always be given the edge or taken as the starting point for what Christians are to believe. To this day, virtually every key book on the subject of preaching--one wants to remove the word "virtually"--assumes that the bible is the unswerving and unwavering authority for the sermon. If preaching is to be preaching, it must be biblical preaching. The preacher is mandated to draw his or her message from the bible. Moreover, since the message comes from the bible, and the bible is invested as the word of God, the sense of authority lodged in the preacher using it can be overwhelming.

In mainline Protestant churches, biblical preaching is more carefully and intellectually meted out, though it must be no less biblical. The newer biblical intellectualism is partially because the fruits of biblical scholarship are respected and the bible is studied in "historical-critical" perspective even in preparation for sermons. A wealth of historical, linguistic and literary information bearing on biblical texts is available to preachers in the form of commentaries, dictionaries and scholarly tomes. Biblical exegesis is taught at least in a rudimentary way in some mainline seminaries, introducing the preacher to the analysis of a biblical text within a number of contexts. Such

study, however, and the commentaries that support it, are not designed to locate the meaning or importance of a text for the modern period. Exegesis, no matter how skilled, is not designed to bridge the difference between that time past and the preacher's time. That task requires other considerations. Every preacher knows that the scholar's designation for these considerations is "hermeneutical methods," and there is no shortage of books on the principles underlying hermeneutical practice, and especially on how to use each method to traverse the distance between the ancient text and the present sermon. Thus we now have, for instance, "existential interpretation," "parable theory," "narrative methodology," "rhetorical criticism," and various kinds of "social-psychological interpretation," among other approaches that one might take. Most preachers have been trained in one or more of these approaches, have had a look at the others, and understand the principle of the "hermeneutical circle," or the idea of being aware that the questions one asks of a text are one's own, and that the questions one asks determine to a large extent the answers one receives. So the cautionary approach to the bible typical of the learned ministry moves away from a naive dependence upon the bible, but it still assumes--often very emphatically and uncritically--that the meaning to be communicated in the sermon must derive from the bible "message."

What is troubling, however, is that even this understanding of hermeneutical procedure is in danger of breaking down. The hermeneutical circle created consternation in times past for those who thought that the bible should unquestionably reveal the simple truth of the word of God untarnished by any mistaken presuppositions or misguided interests that the preacher might have when studying a text. That is not generally the problem with hermeneutics now. The larger problem in the contemporary situation can be broken down into several individual parts: (1) there are so many different

hermeneutical orientations as to be downright confusing; (2) many of the hermeneutical orientations require a technical expertise that only a highly-trained scholar will possess; they are beyond the reach of the working preacher; (3) and often the scholars' interpretations of a given text disagree as a result of their different methodologies. It is also the case that all--literally, all--of the different hermeneutical orientations still assume that the bible, and the bible alone, holds the answers to all our ills, even though we must look beneath the surface, or within the cracks of the text, to find them.

### The Transcultural Message Problem

What is also assumed by virtually all Protestant mainline thinking is that the first century texts that came to be pulled together into the New Testament canon intended to have a transcultural and transhistorical "message" relevant, not only to our time, but to all time. The assumption that those who wrote the documents--at a particular time and place and for particular purposes confined to time and place--intended a universal meaning for their stories is a shaky one, at best. The fact is that we know very little about what was intended for their stories, or even why or how their stories came to be treated as God-directed and, thus, stories with divine meaning and import for all times and places.

The question is why succeeding generations and cultures, including our own, continue to treat these ancient documents as divine oracles. If, in other words, biblical scholars know so much about the bible in its ancient social and historical contexts, why not follow through on a similar approach to the way in which the bible continues to be read and interpreted. The answer, of course, is that things get messy as soon as the use of the bible in the twentieth century is looked at from a social-historical point of view. So New Testament scholars regularly draw a line between their "historical-critical" studies and

their "hermeneutical" suggestions and practices. The hermeneutical materials are aimed at the inculcation of Christian faith and practice. They are therefore usually deemed correct theologically and helpful methodologically from the point of view of contemporary Christianity and for today's preachers. The nagging questions, though, have to do, first, with why it is necessary to do these hermeneutical gymnastics in the first place and, second, with how the bible actually continues to function for Christianity and its cultures.

*For some who study preaching, the transcultural matter is a non-issue.* They readily acknowledge that the framers of the early documents did not have in mind a "message" for all time and places. They look instead, though, at the ancient documents from the viewpoint of the present, contending that, while the documents were not intended for "us," we are able to "find ourselves in" the documents. We are, in other words, able to "identify" with the people, events and human situations of the documents. Hence, the relevance of the documents for the present, whether it was actually intended originally or not. Significantly, this is the way most mainline Protestant preachers deal with the issue. That is, they tend to ignore, or at least play down, the question of biblical origins and pay their homage to the bible as the book in which human "identity" is best mirrored. The problem with this approach, however, is not that it lacks validity, but that the same thing could be said of much ancient, or even less ancient, literature--a claim that many Christian feminists have made for several years. Their view has been, in short, that the male structuring of the biblical canon resulted in a male "image" as the "Christian" image and that expanding the canon to the wider selection of ancient texts is necessary to balance that Christian "image." Seeing the bible in this way does, in fact, go a long way toward freeing one from the lure of "biblical preaching" as a shibboleth.

### The Bible's Epic Function

What, then, is the relation to be between the sermon and the bible? The bible is, without question, essential to the structure of the liturgy and fundamental to the instruction of the congregation that occurs in the sermon. This does not mean that the sermon must be expressly exegetical or even biblical as is assumed in most contemporary Protestant theory and practice. Judging from the long history of preaching, the sermon need not even necessarily refer to the bible or to the readings of the day in order for a sermon to benefit from the evocation of the biblical world that occurs in the liturgy. The readings from the bible are important, not because they provide texts for the sermon, but because they create the Christian imagination of the biblical world. The biblical world can then be assumed by the preacher as the imaginary setting within which the sermon will be heard and interpreted.

The ways in which the bible functions to provide instruction are many and complex. It is important to have some of these ways in view before turning to the place of the bible in preaching. The bedrock instruction that Christians find in the bible stems from what we will call its "epic" function. The grand sweep of the history of people struggling with a set of human interests and divine ideals is filled with incidents, reflections and human responses to situations that have the effect of studies, lessons, examples and precious insights into the human dream of constructing and caring for a just and sustainable society. Mistakes are recorded in the biblical documents as well as daring fantasies. The writings of the canon are disparate, but they can be linked together by tracing the great themes that allow this literature a semblance of coherence: justice and righteousness, war and peace, power and purity, law and order, leadership and covenant, city and land, obedience and protest, piety and the rectification of wrongs. It is, to say the least, an



impressive literature which, by its very nature, forces those who read it into conscious reflection on the costs and conditions of constructing a social order worthy of a creator's approval.

The instruction offered is not merely informative, however, for the power of an epic stems from its genealogical function. Epics tell a people about their own history and thus serve to clarify features of their own time, place, challenges and characters. With Christians, the genealogical link to the grand biblical epic is fictional. Abraham is not the father of gentile Christians; biblical scholars as well as many Christians know that. Thus the biblical epic cannot be taken for granted by Christians who want to be identified with the people of the story. This means that the instructional effectiveness of the bible as epic is won only at the expense of a tremendous investment of social-psychological energy on the part of Christians. They expend this energy in the process of cultivating, teaching, memorizing, internalizing and otherwise appropriating the epic as their own.

The fictional nature of Christianity's claim upon the Hebrew epic suggests that the bible also functions as myth. Myths are stories, usually elaborate, thematic stories, that depict transforming events. It is these events, told in various kinds of imaginative construction, that help people imagine how a world came into being and to account for its already having been lived in before any given generation arrives on the scene. The actions within the myths are usually attributed to originary, legendary or divine beings. Such events, the mythic "founding events" have a special hold on the collective imagination of a people, since they mark the places where beginnings, agreements, purposes and ideal paradigms for life merge into a single grasp of the world or worlds in which a people find themselves. The epic, then, can be viewed as the large, connected sweep of a series of mythic elaborations. Four

major myths dominate the Christian epic as it merges itself with the Hebrew epic. They are the Genesis account of creation, the story of the Exodus, the gospel of Jesus as the Christ with the focus on his crucifixion and resurrection and the apocalyptic imagination of a final judgment. Every Christian is familiar with these myths, since they frame the world of the Christian imagination and determine the ways in which even the most mundane objects and experiences are interpreted. Taken together, these myths make up the epic of Christian thought by virtue of their encompassing scope--from creation to eschaton, an all-inclusive horizon, taking in cosmology, anthropology, theology, soteriology and the breath of social history itself. Also mythic in this system is the way in which the narrative gospels relate to the "old testament" and transform "old time" to "new time." The function of the narrative gospel as the myth and ritual text for the Christian liturgy is also a part of the sweep, since the gospel provides patterns for such things as the Christian understanding of the purpose of human history, the narrative dimension given to the calendrical cycle of time--by the church years, the cycle of readings, the appointment of festivals and so forth--and the way in which all human encounters, events and experiences tend to be interpreted if they have the capacity for signification and meaning. Christians do not normally think of the learning and interpretative use of these mythic patterns as "instruction," even though this is the way in which epic and myth serve to raise, train and educate a new generation into the existing culture.

Once the epic and mythic functions are understood, it is possible to think productively of the bible in terms of a constitution, a charter document foundational for a system of acculturation and governance. Sections of the bible that particularly function as constitution for Christianity are, of course, the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the teachings of Jesus

generally and, by extension, any and all instructions in the genres of wisdom, ethical code and ethical maxim. So the bible does inform and provide instruction by virtue of its function and epic and its own persuasive power as mythic constitution for the religion.

### The Bible and the Sermon

How, then, is the bible to relate to the sermon, to the preaching process? What if we start with the idea that the occasions for writing, reading and rehearsing a biblical composition in antiquity might have been analogous to modern scribal and congregational activity? Then we would have to think of the people of biblical times as being much like us, having to create a social order worthy of human habitation, to clarify social identity, construct and repair their social institutions and reflect upon the state of their own situation and experience. If we could begin to imagine such a social-historical setting for a biblical text, that would immediately loosen the linkage between the bible and the sermon, for then we would not only have the "then-now gap" to deal with--which all preachers recognize and for which we have created hermeneutical methods--but we would be confronted with as complex an imaginative social situation then as we have had to acknowledge for our own occasions for preaching now. That would make the relationship between the "then" of the biblical world and the "now" of our time a much more complex and dynamic comparison and give the preacher more room to explore the connections and so allow for constructive and reflective thought.

The problem with saying this within the context of modern preaching and preaching education is that virtually everyone understands the dilemma of the two "social worlds" of then and now. Yet, when it comes to preaching itself, the biblical text is still taken as a norm, as though its words did emerge from a vacuum, and the task of the preacher is to take those words and "apply"

them to the admittedly-different present situation. The problem is not one of "acknowledgment" of the "then-now" dilemma. It is one of trying to grasp the profound implications of the dilemma, of letting the dilemma reframe our view of what the bible is and then of setting about the preaching task with that "revised bible" honestly in its place. It is the preacher who must finally grasp what most scholars know as the "ethnocentric" problem as it pertains to the bible, and it is the task of preaching scholarship to let that problem shape how the relationship between the bible and the sermon is taught to preachers. Ethnocentrism refers to the extraordinarily difficult task of standing in one culture, particularly a modern culture, and trying to understand the configurations of an ancient culture. The meanings we place on that long-past culture's artifacts simply cannot be presumed to be the meanings that were placed on those artifacts at the time they were produced and disseminated. The scholar's task, indeed the preacher's task as well, is to confront the biblical texts as the ancient artifacts that they are, written far from their "events," both in time and space, and reaching us by third, fourth, fifth hands and beyond. We can examine what we know of historical circumstances, examine the intellectual remnants that have come down to us and think about the social innovations and mythic constructions as we find them alluded to, but despite all this our connection with those times and places is tenuous at best, nonexistent at worst. We know a good deal about the history of the biblical records; we are conscious of the building up of their layers; we know about the enormous, multi-generational lags between purported events and the accounts that were constructed over time of those events. We know, too, of the various Jesus and Christ traditions that persisted not in any one form, but in many forms during those first decades and we know that certain writers appear to have stood at the intersection of some of those traditions,

deciding to "fix" things as all good writers are wont to do. It is not a question of "getting behind" all of these "records" to the "real events." That is the clearest of impossibilities, as most biblical scholars know.

The best that can be done is to see the records that exist for what they are: accounts constructed long after events, whatever they were, had passed, and accounts that were constructed in an effort to control outlook and imagination and to give mythic quality and dimension to mostly hear-say stories. Most, though not all of the stories came to be framed around a remarkable young Jewish prophet who apparently lived and was martyred, and whose surviving teachings form a remarkable set of materials on the human problems of living and sustaining life. Saying this is not an attempt to belittle Jesus, his life, teachings or "work;" it is, however, to say that we do not have a clear understanding of who Jesus was, where he came from or what he did. What we have are some striking mythic constructions that begin with his revolutionary remembrances or traditions and give his presence on earth a full, truly unparalleled epic treatment. One can argue, in fact, that since he was only one of many such Jewish revolutionaries at the time, those who set out to argue for "following him" decided to go all the way in making him to be not only "a god," but God himself. In most Christian circles today, and particularly in churches, just saying such things as this causes great consternation, since the bible as "word of God" is presumed to be the basis upon which all preaching must, without question, proceed. And yet intellectual, and even pulpit, honesty requires that the nature and the mythic dimensions of the biblical documents be not only acknowledged but embraced.

#### Discard the Bible?

Why not, then, some will ask, just throw the bible away? The answer is "no," absolutely not, even though the response will come wailing back: But

you already have thrown the bible away by denying its status as "word of God." That, though, is simply an indefensible point of view, given the reality of biblical documents. Still, the bible is a critically-important part of the preaching process--for two reasons. First, the biblical documents, the bible as both Old and New Testaments, represents a remarkable record of people living in trying times, struggling with questions at the heart of all religious experience. These were people from several cultures and many backgrounds who gave a variety of answers to questions of meaning, ethics and transcendence, answers that, in many cases, are worth our consideration for today. Was God speaking through their answers, through their efforts to create society? Undoubtedly, yes. Can we still listen and perhaps even profit from those answers that they found? Undoubtedly yes, again. Will our answers necessarily be the same as theirs? Perhaps not. Must we search for and give our best efforts to find answers, too? Absolutely we must. And the preacher has a role--some would say it could be a key role again--to play in that search. And the bible will often serve as a beginning point in the search for such answers. The second reason is related to this one; and it is that the bible is our heritage, both the Old and New Testaments. It is, to a striking degree, the seminal document on which our intellectual, moral and cultural heritages rest. It is a collection of materials that do shed enormous light on who we are and where we have come from. It is a book that requires our very best intellectual scrutiny, a book that we cannot set aside if we desire to understand why we are like we are and intend to sort through both the best and the worst of this broad stream of culture in which we live.

If the bible is not for "proclamation" or not the sourcebook for all the questions of our lives, then how is the preacher to use the bible? The answer is by working its "gaps." We do know some things about antiquity, and

treating a text as one that made sense in some social-historical setting from biblical times would give us a way to set up the modern social-historical setting and examine the "gap." That is the "gap" in its simplest form. It is not the "application" of what the bible says to the present time--not in any way. It is, instead, an exploration of whether what the bible says in its own setting might or might not provide a workable option within the range of options available for modern thought and behavior. This is, to be sure, a kind of hermeneutic, but it only begins the "gap" process with the bible, which quickly moves beyond hermeneutics as we usually understand the process. We would also look for gaps among the imaginative worlds that collide within the bible itself. As one spans the time of Old to New Testaments, it becomes obvious that we have before us a collection of disparate texts from a lively history of more than a thousand years, and one should, one suspects, be able to spot a few incongruities of the kind Christians take for granted all the time when juggling their own four-fold worlds, the symbolic worlds that we discussed earlier.

The first and most obvious instance of a distinctive difference between two sets of texts and their imaginative worlds is that between the Old and New Testaments. Every Christian knows about this distinction, since it is fundamental to Christian mythology and basic for the structure of Christian thinking itself. The way it works traditionally is that the Old Testament is understood to come from the time of promise (or, worse, from the period of law, failure and sin), whereas the New Testament comes from the time of fulfillment (or gospel, rectification and redemption). This works out nicely for a system of theology that thinks dialectically, exaggerates oppositions, dramatizes issues and desires radical transformation as the best solution to human problems. But, is it an honest reading of this literature? And is it the

only way to rationalize this Christian imagination? What if we were honest about the fact that the arrangement of texts in the Christian bible is a Christian achievement of the fourth century, and its very arrangement is a result of a Hebrew desire to redirect the Hebrew epic away from the institutions of formative Judaism to flow, instead, into the Christian time? We should then become aware that the Christian reading of the Old Testament scriptures may not be the only way to read them. Jewish eyes have never seen what Christians see in these texts, and historians of religion have known for some time that Christians have to struggle to make the Old Testament point invariably toward its fulfillment in early Christianity. Allegory, typology, and tracing the history of Israel's failures are only some of the ways in which Christians read the Old Testament at two levels at once in order to claim that, at the level of divine intention and purpose, the Christian story started with creation and unfolded in the history of Israel.

This means that the Christian epic itself is a construal of two major overarching worlds--gaps and all--arranged in such a way as to try to overcome the obvious differences between them and allow for some imaginary continuity. The very names of Old and New Testament show, however, that the two worlds are not only understood to be different, but that they are ranked, that they are not thought of as equal in value for Christian instruction. This interpretive schema is built into the very order and arrangement of books in both collections, so that, for example, the Old Testament ends with Malachi's prediction of Elijah's return and the New Testament opens with stories of John the Baptist (as Elijah redivivus) and Jesus fulfilling that prediction. The schema of prediction and fulfillment was then institutionalized in the assignment of scriptural passages for daily and weekly reading throughout the church year. For a given Sunday, for instance, three readings will include



an Old Testament text, a Psalm, a reading from a gospel and a passage from a New Testament letter. Every Christian knows that the Old Testament readings serve as a preparatory background for highlighting the significance and glory of the New Testament lesson. Thus there is always a tension between the two parts of the biblical world, a tension usually understood and accepted, but seldom explored.

The preacher can take advantage of the gap between the Old Testament world and the New Testament world by deciding not only to call attention to it, but by exploring its different ways of handling human and social issues. Regardless of how far the preacher takes it, merely to notice such a contrast would allow for any number of critical and constructive moves as the relationships between and among texts on a given Sunday are taken as the occasion for rethinking cross-cultural issues and other questions of significance for social construction. The preacher need not worry about doing damage to the epics. The Christian epic is deeply etched on the Christian imagination and deeply embedded in the traditions of Western culture as well. So the preacher can count on it as a firmly entrenched foil, part of the givenness of the congregation's resources for thinking about the world in which it lives. As a result, the preacher can use the gap for raising even the most critical questions about why and how Christians take their place in the world at large. To further explore real gaps in the textual disparities between Old and New Testaments--as in Matthew's rewriting of Old Testament texts to construe "prophetic" references--is to raise additional questions about how myth systems themselves are created and revised, then and now--a matter to which we shall return.

Setting the Christian lens aside, the Old Testament world comes into view as an epic of another kind. The great themes of the bible are still there to be appreciated, and the texts do not lose their significance either as strikingly important human documents or as literature foundational to our cultural heritage. The world, however, that is projected by these texts can be seen also to support a religion and culture other than our own. The Jewish claim to their own scriptures has always been there on the periphery of the Christian awareness of the double-layered history of Israel. But seldom has this consciousness been allowed to work its way toward constructive cross-cultural ends. By recognizing that the Christian Old Testament is also the Jewish Tannach, texts that are fit not only for imaginary but also for actual attempts in cross-cultural understanding suddenly come into view. When the Christian lens is removed, the books of the Old Testament do not fall apart. They cohere and project an epic imagination of truly magnificent design, a design forged of the same texts as those used for the Christian epic, but which now can be seen to work in support of another culture as well. All one has to do is rearrange the order of the books in keeping with Tannach and a difficult cultural framework appears, one that ends with the call to "Go up and build a house for the Lord at Jerusalem."

So what good are these texts if they do not always point to or depict the Christ? Even as part of a Hebrew instead of a Christian epic, they are ideal for self-reflective sermons, sermons that explore cultural and liturgical gaps. The New Testament texts provide, of course, the building blocks of the Christian epic, giving access--though always through a glass darkly--into the worlds of Christian imagination in those first centuries. This is because both the Old and the New Testaments document, not a story of a single, clearly-revealed divine imperative as seen through a Christian lens, but instead both revolve around

the great themes, debates, experiments, visions and intellectual labors foundational for all forms of Western culture and religion. They are a precious resource for reflection on the social and multicultural issues that confront us in the late twentieth century.

Ironically, after the Old Testament is given its own integrity, analysis can proceed by locating yet other moments in which differences, distinctions and lack of correspondence among conceptual, narrative and social worlds provided the space and stimulation for the intellectual labor demanded of Hebrew theologians then, as well as the critical distance required of us now. Everywhere there are stimulating gaps. Think of Amos and Hosea and the gaps between their ideals for Israel and the realities of their respective social situations, gaps that called forth and enabled intense critiques. Think of the difference between the two prophets and their critiques in relation to the fact that each appealed to a different epic tradition--with Amos and the Exodus tradition on the one side and Hosea and the Jerusalem tradition on the other. Think of each as different because of different social locations with their resulting differences for the history and epic of Israel. In this context, the idea of "the" word of God becomes something worth exploring for our orientation.

Naturally one could go on and on. Biblical scholarship has analyzed the Old Testament texts in detail and marked their distinctive traits with care. The preacher need not know it all. No biblical scholar knows it all. It is enough to know that the gaps are there and that they come in all shapes and sizes: ideals and social reality, differing definitions of Israel, differing theologies, different responses to historical circumstances, different views--all from God we assume--on the great issues constantly under debate. Add to this all of the great debates that were never resolved: Do the people need a king? If the

people have a king, how do you tell a good one from a bad one? If you have a bad one, what do you do? Or, what does the Lord require? Offerings, wisdom, obedience, justice, righteousness, piety? And what are the ways of finding out what the Lord requires? Visions, preachments, wisdom, torah, obedience, instruction or epic rehearsal? And the goal of it all? A city with a temple in it? A land for all time for the people of Israel? A righteous people? A world in agreement on worship, law and practice?

Once one gets the hang of it, even the gaps within the New Testament are not difficult to find. Think of the differing views about Jesus, the many names for the new congregations, the various ways of relating to Jewish institutions, the experiments in ethical codes, the confusion over social boundaries, the many Christologies and gospels, the conflicts over leadership, the attraction of the mystery religions, or an apocalyptic view of history, or a gnostic view of the cosmos, and the range of anthropologies and soteriologies that early Christians had to juggle.

The stakes obviously were high. What were they? Did they not have to do with working out the agreements for a social experiment called a gathering (ecclesia) and a symbol that served as its ideal (kingdom of God)? How to imagine both the social formation and its ideal was the challenge. Where to locate them, how to relate them to the cultures of context, how to link them up with the epic and intellectual traditions flowing into the Greco-Roman world, how to define their borders, work out their internal structures, distribute leadership, make space for individuals to display their contributions, agree on the codes of ethic and the orders for worship, all and more were questions that the new religion had to face. By the fourth century, and by virtue of the Constantinian development, the set of writings was agreed upon that was to serve as the epic and foundational charter for the church. Although there

was never a formal decision by any church council on what we now call the canon, a combination of common practice in the reading of texts and their collection by leaders and copyists had produced what we now call the bible. With the construction of buildings on the sacred sites, the practice of pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and the production of mosaics to depict the biblical scenes, Christianity settled into place and with it the biblical world was Christianized.

In retrospect, we are clearly a part of the Christianized world, we preachers. We still take up our roles of leadership within it. What is critical, though, to the way in which we play our roles is how we view, and utilize, the bible in our work. In many ways, we do not turn away from the bible. Instead, what we bring to the bible is a sense of its role, not only in the church, but as part of a much larger body of ancient literature--literature full of "gaps," gaps to be faced and dealt with in the context of the enterprise of living in the very different world of the present.

## CHAPTER 6

## The Process of "Gap Preaching"

In this project of rethinking the nature of preaching, it is time to move closer to the sermon itself, to its conception, its preparation, even its presentation.\* It should be obvious that this study was not designed as a manual on the process of preaching. It has, instead, been an inquiry into the overall dynamic of the sermon situation. The effort has been guided by two basic notions: first, to set the sermon situation into an anthropological and cultural context to get a sense of what it "looks like" from a radically different angle; and, second, to determine a context for the sermon that does not rely solely, or even primarily, on a biblical paradigm. What we have seen, in short, is that even apart from the notion of "biblical preaching" the sermon can and does make use of the bible, while acknowledging its historic and mythological dimensions. And while this is, in a sense, a kind of critique of "biblical preaching," beyond that it is an attempt to place the bible into the larger setting of religion and culture. What emerges is a new role, in a sense, for the modern preacher, a role of "preaching the gaps" of past and present wherever those gaps are found that affect the task of living in a contemporary setting.

Several "ends" remain to be tied together as we make our way toward the "doing" of the modern sermon. In a sense, it still remains for us to sharpen our focus on the nature of Christianity and the role of Christian symbols in the preaching situation. After that, we turn our attention to some implications of a more practical nature regarding the sermon itself.

---

\* Pages 97 through 115 are an edited version of several different sections of Burton L. Mack's manuscript, "The Gospel and the Gaps." They are incorporated here with the permission of the author.

Does Christianity Have a Future?

The question of whether Christianity is near the end of its "time," whether its usefulness as a Western religion has run its course in a complex multi-national world is one that troubles many modern thinkers, many preachers among them. It is a question as well that reaches to the multitudes of thoughtful people throughout the world who have, for all practical purposes, already turned their backs on Christianity. Many clearly believe that Christianity's mission-driven program of salvation and proselytism, its vision of calling everyone into its "kingdom of God," cannot make the adjustment to a new multicultural world. It is true that, at first, the answer seems to be that Christianity cannot adjust to a new age of the twenty-first century, given how thoroughly shaped by the history of Christian mission and mentality it is. How can such a mindset ever shift, not only to the acceptance of others in their differences, but to thinking that such difference is good and to taking delight in a world where Christians have only their part to play?

One cannot be sure, of course, for cultures do die and with them their religions and their gods. But cultures can also undergo metamorphoses and Christianity has taken many forms during the course of its history. Some say that, though Christianity has suffered changes, it has never relinquished the persuasion of its singular claim to truth and its mission to convert the world. They argue, therefore, that Christianity cannot accommodate a multicultural world without ceasing to be the religion-with-a-mission it is supposed to be. The persistence of those features that support the Christian desire for a world transformed into the kingdom of God does create a very serious problem for Christian self-definition in our time.

Others, though, seem to understand that the Christian's global vision does not--indeed, cannot any longer--demand the conversion of all peoples to Christianity. What, then, is to be the "vision" of Christianity in a multicultural world? If Christianity is no longer to be mission-driven, then what will drive it with sufficient force to ensure its survival as a world religion? What, in other words, is the Christian stake in the future of the world's religions and cultures? Can the old Christian interest in converting the world be changed into a genuine people concern, a humanistic concern? But then, for what? Justice? Liberty? Self-determination? Is it really necessary for the church to go beyond such things as having a creative, humanistic curiosity about other people, an openness to them that reflects, heaven help us, caring for them? Does religion not teach us the fundamental value of understanding and sharing with all kinds of people in their living processes, of knowing delight in human cooperative activity and display, of partaking in the joy of shared achievements? Can Christianity, in short, be understood as a religion that fosters cross-cultural understanding? Can Christianity write a script for cross-boundary intercourse, discourse and trade? Can preachers and those in the pews do this together in the context of the church? The answer remains to be seen, for we have not yet explored the capacity of our symbols to signify such endeavors, nor have we explored the gap between our present symbols and what those symbols might have to become. The point is, though, that in contrast to the current conservative retrenchment and resistance to rethinking the Christian religion, the structure of the religion itself not only invites, but almost demands, rearrangement when the lack of fit with the real world tears its people apart from within and makes it look inappropriate from without.



The crux of the challenge is that the Christian religion has fostered the notion that it is based on a unique, *sui generis*, prior, transcendent revelation and that therefore its claim to truth is untouched and untouchable by the exigencies of the social histories of its peoples. Christianity has then combined this notion of singular truth with an all-embracing global mission. We are therefore prone to single-system thinking that, when confronted with difference of any kind, spins off into dualistic thinking, setting up either a hierarchical ranking between the enlightened and those who have not seen the light, or an opposition of the pairs, as between the good guys and the bad guys. In order to unify the contrasts and oppositions, Christians dream of transformations by imagining conversions, reversals and radical reconstructions of those who do not conform to the Christian vision. Christians are reticent to acknowledge any other gap in their worldview than that between this so-called Christian vision and the rest of the world. Christians therefore continually assert their beliefs in their imaginary Christian world and they get serious only when the "other" worlds do not conform. But does this mean that Christians are incapable of living creatively and with humor in a multicultural world?

One of the contentions of this study has been that Christianity actually works the same way other religions do. The myths, rituals, sacred writings, and so forth, of Christianity play the same roles in the practice of this religion as they do in all religions. We have to take seriously how a cultural anthropologist looks at us. All religions have their distinctive wrinkles and unique insights that mark their particular solution to the complicated project of social construction and personal well-being. In one sense--in this sense--all religions may be said to be alike. But since religion is a part of the human state, the task is one of evaluating one's religion and religions with which one

shares the world. For Christians, that evaluation process is set up as a self-conscious one, a thoughtful one that becomes part of the liturgy itself. It does no good to engage in a lot of clever rationalizations and pasting over of the gaps in our complex systems of symbols, sacred writings and rituals. This is because there always seems to be a drive toward order, system and coherence when humans construct their worlds, both internally and collectively. So the gaps are always there underneath the seams in any given arrangement of symbols, and when the stretch between the symbols and a given social history runs out, the gaps widen as they have now for the Christian imagination. Thus the task is clear. Christians will have to acknowledge the fragmentation of their various symbolic worlds and try to reimagine a new, more workable arrangement of their symbols. If Christians want to see themselves playing a useful role in a pluralistic world, Christians symbols will have to be recast in order to make room for other religions and cultures in the Christian worldview.

### Remaking the Christian Symbols

Reframing the Christian symbols is, then, one of the overall objectives of the sermon itself. And one of the sets of tools for symbolic re-evaluation is found in those "four worlds" that we considered in an earlier chapter. The invitation to symbolic examination and rearrangement is, as we have seen, built into the system. We have seen that the liturgy, which is the definitive Christian event, is also a Christian activity. Christians congregate to reactivate four major imaginative, or symbolic, worlds and readjust their alignments, as we have seen. This requires a process of thinking, since the comparison and contrast of worlds cannot proceed apart from complex mental procedures and the making of judgments at every turn. Judgments can fall both ways, on the contextual worlds of societies and their cultures, and on the

Christian worlds of the bible and the liturgy or, in a sense, the process of "doing church." The liturgy is designed, in fact, to make this process of relating the world take place. It brings the several worlds of the Christian imagination into play in just a certain way. Two of the worlds, the bible and the liturgy, are activated by physical location ("going to church," the "house of God"), and actual contact with objects that symbolize or evoke these imaginary worlds. They are then made present by a ritual rehearsal that involves the participation of people who, by this means, acknowledge that they have entered and seen these imaginary worlds. It is the purpose of the liturgy to reconstruct and align these two worlds as the temporary habitation of the people who are treated as the people or children of God. The liturgy is a script that achieves its effect by means of the logics of narrative and performance. Sequence makes a difference, as does the inclusion or exclusion of various episodes. Who performs what role--and how--directly affects the ethos of the liturgy and thus evokes the way in which it relates to the other worlds under consideration.

The other two worlds (the daily social world and the culture of context) are recognized by their difference, distance and temporary absence from the world of the liturgy. Entering the sanctuary leaves them behind but they are by no means forgotten. The liturgy would not work if it lost its bearing upon their larger scene. The symbolic worlds expressly activated by the liturgy cannot create a real world capable of sustaining a fully-fledged human enterprise. The liturgy does not intend to provide an escape by making present the Christian vision, but only a momentary vantage place for comparison and reflection upon the larger world of the everyday. In fact, a closer analysis of the liturgy would show that the work-a-day world of the people is constantly in view, though consistently from the perspective of the

Christian world and its tenor, as, for example, in the prayers of the people. The people are fully engaged in the order of the liturgy, but they always keep the world at large in mind.

This means that the liturgy not only allows but demands comparison and contrast among the four major worlds of the Christian imagination. If the differences among the worlds are manageable, the liturgy functions to conform the Christian world and supply the people with skills for living in the gaps. A range of attitudes toward the real world is possible. The society and culture of context can be construed as normal, blessed and celebratable, acknowledged as a difficult arena, or placed under critique. In all of these cases, the ideal Christian order is left in place as the standard by which the world is judged and attention is drawn to the adjustments that are required in order to see the real world as a place where Christians can live and continue to imagine the Christian world as the ideal.

When the differences among the four major worlds become unmanageable, another dynamic occurs that creates pressure for change. A spectrum of options presents itself. On the "right," or conservative, end of the spectrum is the possibility that the real world will suffer condemnation and that Christians position themselves to withdraw from full participation in the world, or even flee. Fleeing from the real world often involves withdrawal from the enculturated church, however, so that tendencies to privatization and the formation of enclaves and sects is noticeable. On the "left," or progressive, end of the spectrum of options, Christians will be energized to work for the change, or even the revolution of, the society and culture under critique.

Another possibility lies near the middle of the spectrum of options. It is that the Christian world also come under critique. This option is currently under consideration here and our "gap theory" may help to understand its

dynamics. Pressure to review the Christian world results from social and cultural change in which Christians are involved. Informed by values and sensibilities held to be Christian, Christians can find themselves in projects, activities and personal quests that eventually challenge traditional ways of thinking about Christian symbols. Consider, for instance, the social changes currently taking place as a result of the experiences and voices of women asking to be understood, to be given full standing not only within the society and culture, but within the church. To acknowledge and respond to these voices and social changes in Christian circles has required a major revision of the symbols for God, as in the inclusive language lectionaries and bibles, as in the images of Christ, with huge shifts away from traditional male-dominated "Christologies," and even in the idea of the Holy Spirit as the appropriate symbol for shifting the definition of Christian "spirituality." Consider further the recent reconsideration of traditional ways of thinking about the spirit of God occasioned by the multicultural constituency of the assembly of the World Council of Churches which met in Australia in 1991. Christians from nonwestern nations refused to relinquish their indigenous identities and imbued the services of worship with the spirits of their cultural histories. This resulted in a painful but constructive rethinking of the Christian symbol of the Spirit.

Christian symbols derive from a long history of piety, thought and practice. As in other religions, Christian symbols represent investments of emotion and intellect in their intersections where signs, symbols, myths, rituals and imaginary worlds try to overlap and intersect. Those points are charged with emotion and significance because of these concentrations and serve to hold together disparate worlds. At this level, the symbols also form a system and represent a vast and comprehensive worldview. Because they are

interrelated, a strong symbol can stand for the whole. In addition, if any symbol is resignified, the entire symbol system--both internally and collectively--with its worldview will shift.

Christian symbols represent solutions to the problem of relating the four worlds of the Christian imagination. The traditional symbols, such as the cross, the table and the bible as sacred book, combined with various representations of the trinity, 'create an overarching worldview that subsumes the four worlds of that Christian imagination. This system is recognized by all Christians as the traditional imagery of the Christian religion. As we suggested earlier, most Christians feel a resistance to thinking of their religion as a symbolic or mythic system but that is the way it all works. The fact is, though, that this system of symbols is what allows the ideal Christian order of the world to remain in place while Christians move in and out of the other worlds in which they live. Some churches leave a candle burning as a symbol of the divine spirit that is imagined eternally present in the world. The cross is often placed on the external surface of church buildings as a continual public reminder of Christianity's presence. Steeples rise to signal a Christian sense of transcendence in the midst of more mundane stimuli. Shrines, bells, and gold-leafed bibles keep the Christian view in place. And every denomination has its way of talking about the Christian "faith" in language that assumes a Christian orientation to things. This view of the world is designed to locate such notions as the kingdom of God, heaven, cosmic mystery, salvation and the hidden realms of spiritual power in some permanent place. From this system of symbols philosophical and theological conceptions are generated and organized as rational systems. The symbolic representation of a Christian worldview is thus the way in which the Christian imagination seeks to override the discrepancies among its disparate worlds and

establish a comprehensive order that can guarantee permanence for its treasured values and experiences.

Christians, for the most part, have not been taught to think critically about their worldview, but they know they have one and they know it has to compete with other ways of understanding the world. They also know that other Christians can have different worldviews, or at least different in some fundamental ways. Many Christians know, too, that in the course of human and Christian history Christianity itself has entertained a number of different worldviews. Yet there have been some constants. These are the symbols that cluster at the center of the Christian imagination, the "hub" symbols. The important thing to know about these symbols, too, is that rearrangements and resignifications can occur. The reformation itself depicts nothing so much as a vast rethinking and reworking of central Christian symbols. Times change, societies change, cultures shift, leaps of technology occur, and with these changes must come changes in religion, in religious symbolism and thinking. The fact is, as we have tried to emphasize, we are squarely in the midst of such pushing and pulling now. We have sketched the extraordinary changes in population movement and cultural meshing that has gone on over the past century. And with those changes, Christian symbols, even the most basic and "constant" ones, are threatening to, or have already, come apart for many Christians. Naturally, many Christian leaders are reticent to acknowledge that this is the case. Many thinking lay Christians are simply abandoning Christianity as a viable means for moving into the new multicultural world that is emerging. Virtually all Christians, though, are having to explore the relevance of the Christian faith, values and ethic for life amidst such obvious change. Values thought traditionally to be Christian are no longer taken for granted among us, because we simply do not know which ones are truly ours,

how they may be anchored to Christian symbols, and what to make of the same values when espoused by nonChristians in other religions or in the society or world at large. Hierarchical patterns of leadership are breaking down. Roles of authority are crumbling. More intensely than at most points in the past, so-called Christian value is being pitted against Christian value in confronting current issue after current issue, such as in determining the meaning and value of life in matters of abortion and euthanasia, population planning, just wars, the nature of autonomous states and so forth. Church and Christian symbols are coming apart. There is an enormous amount of religious work to do, as far as the Christian worldview is concerned, and the only place to do it is in the minds and hearts of Christians who still congregate to celebrate and meditate on their common commitments to constructing a world that is humane, safe and sustainable.

#### What Does the Sermon Do?

The relevance of the gap theory, or gap preaching, for such work now comes into view. Gap theory is an effect to describe the arena within which thoughtful reflection can occur about the way in which Christians understand themselves and their roles in the world. Instead of relying on absolutes, whether in the form of inviolate symbols, Christian teachings or ready-made bible judgments about the state of the world at large, gap theory opens up the Christian worldview, the fundamental Christian symbols, for reconsideration--in fact, gap theory virtually demands that the Christian worldview be opened up. This orientation does so by recognizing the four worlds of the imagination that are subsumed in the Christian worldview and by acknowledging their differences and the tensions sustained among them. Thinking in this arena is comparative, critical, constructive, probing and "in-house," as it were. The



thesis here is that the Christian liturgy calls for this critical comparison and revision by design, and it takes place in what is called the sermon.

The sermon is the place, at least in most of Protestantism, where the liturgy comes to a focus. From the point of view presented in this study, the sermon is, by its nature, a meditation, a kind of collective reflection ranging over the gaps of the so-called four worlds that we outlined earlier. At a key level, such reflection is mental; intellectual, even though it calls into play the emotions or feelings that lie most deeply within both the preacher and the congregants: that, in fact, was the gist of our discussion of the "hub symbols" that form the general structure of imagination for everyone present at the sermon. Even the body is involved in many liturgical sermons, since movement, rhythm and collective interaction can become part of the meditational process. There is a sense in which the sermon, as a meditation presented from the pulpit, is deeply involving and engaging--even when those gathered sit quietly and appear only to listen.

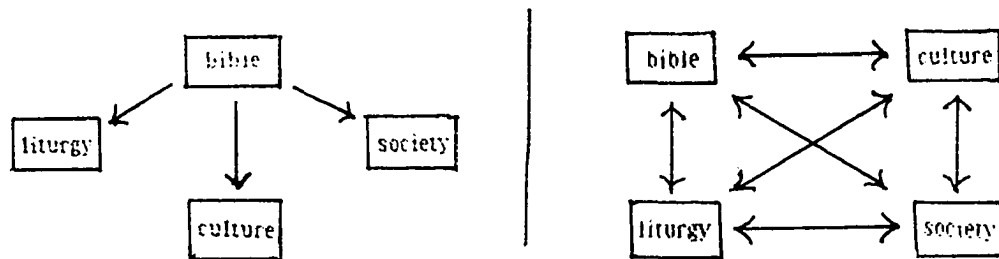
The sermon as meditation does, however, provide the occasion for specific things to occur within a speaking situation. For example, the sermon is the place where an ancient text, whether biblical or non-biblical, is acknowledged and even addressed, then explored for insights from the past that may elucidate situations or features of the present world. The sermon is the place where the congregation is addressed directly in the interest of making sure that all understand and appreciate the significance of the liturgical experience as a particular form of the community's connection with a distant past. When the sermon is preached, the congregation is addressed as people who live in a nonreligious world, who have come from it and will return to it. In the sermon, the preacher is able to address a challenge of living as a Christian--that is, the challenge of evaluating and adjudicating the

worlds of the Christian imagination. It is in the sermon that the congregation is invited to counteract both society and culture in ways that rethink and recreate the arrangements of living. The sermon is the place for honest and pensive reflection about the way in which Christians attach values to a given arrangement of Christian and cultural symbols. It is the place where the preacher has the privilege and responsibility of bringing thoughts to public articulation, and the thoughts are his or her own, born from honest, full acknowledged life experiences and painstaking study and rumination. In the sermon, the preacher and congregants can together face who they are, what have been the power arrangements between and among them, both within and outside the church, and how new forms of being together and creating community can come to expression in their midst. The sermon is the place where the preacher can challenge the bible, can engage the ancient texts in a modern dialogue, arguing with them, playing with them, searching around and underneath them, often debunking them. It is the place where the church's own history can be engaged, evaluated and challenged, where new futures can be imagined and formed. The sermon is the place where the hub symbols of Christian faith and piety can be not only affirmed, but also evaluated and reconfigured. It is the place where the gaps can be fully acknowledged, examined and reconfigured. It is the one place where all four worlds of the Christian imagination come together. It is a place worthy of enormous attention and care for one called upon to preach.

#### Some Guidelines for Preparation

How does a preacher learn to "play the gaps," though, in the preparation and presentation of a sermon? It begins, as should be clear by now, in learning to find, to "see" and verbalize the "gaps." One is no longer preaching "texts." One is no longer trying to "let the bible speak for itself."

One is going to help the hearers best by finding and preaching the "gaps" of life, and this study has tried to isolate and explain an enormous number of them along the way. One can best begin to "learn" to see them by returning to a model that we utilized earlier in this study, the model of the "four symbolic worlds." We will sketch it in two ways, though, like this:



We have drawn it in two ways, the first in a concessionary sort of way, and the second in a way that holds, in our judgment, the most liberating and promising way of conceiving the gaps for preaching. In the first model, the bible is still there, still in the place where most preachers have placed it by both training and experience. It occupies the key position, indicating that, for many, it must be the starting point for the sermon. The focus of the sermon, though, can no longer be the bible itself. The emphasis, even in this model, must be on the "gap," the gap between the bible and the liturgy, the gap between the bible and some dimension of society, the gap between the bible and some facet of modern culture. And the sermon must look at both sides of the gap with an equally critical spirit. It is not just a "hermeneutic of suspicion;" not just that one is to study and preach biblical texts "critically." It is more than that. It is that one must examine anything and everything about the bible from the viewpoint as well of this society, this culture, this practice of the liturgy and the church's history. It is the "gap" that is to be examined, and the focus of the sermon will be on the interactive dimension between culture, society and bible, with bible viewed largely as one of the major

formative elements of where we live now, both the good and the bad of it. The question, then, that the preacher asks in the initial sermon preparation is about the gap--where is the gap? If I take a particular text, or a particular problem, or a particular pericope from the bible, where is the gap that must be addressed, and how does that gap look when viewed from all sides, the bible's being only one of those orientations? There one has a new "handle" on what is to be preached that will reach today's hearer.

The second model, the one that sets the alignment differently, takes the bible out of the "controlling position," as it were, and places it within the context of the other "worlds" that contain the gaps for the sermon. The general approach here is the same as what we just indicated, but it is different in one significant way: the bible is a part of the gap process, but it is possible to preach sermons dealing with "gap" matters, important gap matters, that may, in fact, not take the bible itself into account. Granted, that is antithetical to virtually all preaching theory today, but there are some matters, some gaps, that may not find the bible's "message" even to be relevant, some matters, in fact, on which the bible has nothing to say, or if it has something to say, it is so "out of touch" with modern thought as to find no place in the ongoing discussion. This has to be acknowledged and dealt with. These models, though, give one a "starting point" when one confronts the question: how do I pick something to preach? Where do I look, and how?

What needs emphasis at this point, though, is that it is the preacher's sensibility and intelligence that goes to work here. The preacher is not a "middle" person between bible and audience, not a funnel through which the "message" must pass. The preacher is the active, studying, thinking, working person seeking to find the gaps and say something worthwhile about them. The preacher is the one who must probe the gaps between the biblical and

liturgical worlds and the worlds of living itself, what we have called the worlds of society and culture. How, in other words, is an individual to live in the world? Is there any workable bearing that the biblical/liturgical worlds have on this "real" world of family and divorce, employment and dismissal, hate and fear, deviousness and sham and all of the other feelings and drives that make us what we are, both individually and together.

It is the preacher who must somehow find those gaps and help hearers to bridge them. Because of the sermon, the preacher is thrust into the very center of this critical process of comparing and contrasting and pulling worlds together. There is no escape. But, insofar as the preacher is also a member of the congregation, this society and culture, as well as the human race, the preacher must be able and willing to draw on the only other checklist he or she has; namely, the way in which what the preacher says correlates with what he or she thinks, espouses, how she or he lives and works the gaps day in and day out, too. What the preacher does, in short, is to find the gaps and every week engage the congregants in a well-thought-out, albeit spontaneous, conversation that addresses an issue of importance in trying to live a creative life that touches and bridges two or more of the four worlds that shape us. The preacher is the one who broods over the gaps. The preacher is the one who searches himself or herself and brings that searching, as well as its results, into the pulpit for a conversation over the hard gaps of the day. The preacher knows what the institutions of the city and state and federal government are doing and how they will impact lives. The preacher knows the gap between loving someone and being scared to death of them. The preacher knows the gap between helping someone in need and knowing that their need is an absolute rip-off. The preacher knows those gaps, and dozens more like them, just as every member of every congregation knows them. It is

the preacher who brings the gaps into the pulpit for some helpful thinking and talking. No solutions necessarily; certainly no pronouncements. But deep, serious thinking. Playful thinking. Thinking that can probe and push and pull, that can try things out and even back away.

In order to get started with such guided conversations, the preacher has an unlimited resource of texts, biblical and nonbiblical, images from newspapers and magazines, themes of the day in the arts and media, topics and issues that cause people to get lost, to dislike other people who disagree with them and so forth. Sermons can start with biblical texts, but it quickly becomes obvious that for many things that need to be thought through in the pulpit, starting with a "text" is the worst thing one could do. If one is preaching a sermon or series of sermons on the relation between Christianity and another great religion of the world, a "text" is of very little value, and in fact would probably ruin the whole context of what would otherwise be an open-ended, probing discussion. The problem, from the gap point of view, is never "what" to preach, because everywhere one turns there is another issue that needs the pulpit's attention. The problem is that there are too many things, too many points of departure, that everything that troubles us all counts. The challenge is to find a focus that will help a given group of Christians reflect responsibly upon their worlds, render critical judgments called for, even when those judgments within the group may differ, and try to continually imagine ways to engage their world at large in a healing, creative manner.

The selection of the beginning point for the sermon is not, of course, an innocent procedure. Even the selection of a text, if one chooses to start with a biblical text, is usually guided by deeply-felt, highly-charged considerations. Many preachers, of course, tend to be guided by the lectionary, but a large

number are not. "This is the text I want because this particular matter is on my mind," is still often the way in which texts come to be picked, and this despite the fact that such texts are often introduced to congregations in a fairly innocent fashion. And the process of preparation itself, the contemplative process, is not exempt from strategic considerations of rhetoric and audience. It does not matter, really, where one enters the circular processes of thinking toward a sermon as long as the point of entry is governed by a reasonable assessment of the life-situation of one's congregation in relation to the world-gaps of the Christian imagination.

Once the topic or issue is settled on, whether a biblical text is tied to the topic or issue or not, the function of the sermon within the liturgical setting does call for a few guidelines to control the process of paring down to the delivery of the sermon. First, from the point of view of "gap preaching," it is suggested that at least two or three of the worlds of the Christian imagination be expressly touched on in the course of the sermon. Second, the sermon must pay strict attention to where the gap is that is being addressed and use that gap as the focal point for all that is said by the preacher. Third, any and all incongruencies that the gap makes visible must be acknowledged and handled honestly, whether the outcome is neat and smooth or not. Often the best sermons have no good ending or conclude with an assessment of the bumps themselves. Fourth, the space provided by the sermon's gap must be played with some constructive proposal in mind, or at least with some directions toward a proposal. Proposals are not pronouncements in the old sermonic manner.<sup>1</sup> They are creative suggestions, a sharing by the preacher of a

---

<sup>1</sup> The term "proposal" here is meant to suggest that the preacher must, if you please, have "something to say," but must say it in a way that is "suggestive" rather than "pronounced." This is, as many will point out, not substantially different from the sermon "style" of feminist, narrative or other inductive preachers. In a sense, then, methodologically this has much in

particular plan. It is the work of one who, in a sense, leads by engaging and teaching. The sermon, while often affirming and celebrative, is not designed to leave the people "where they are." It is designed to move them in some fashion. It should challenge them in some direction, transport them from where they are toward some new way of thinking, acting or being that is creative and life-enhancing. Fifth, the sermon must be endlessly interesting, the conversation spoken in a lively way, always with a twinkle in the eye, the face and the voice. The days of congregations tolerating boredom from the pulpit are over.

Ironically, we know that the interesting preacher is not the one who necessarily says the most interesting things; the interesting preacher is the one who is endlessly interested--deeply interested--in what he or she is bringing to the pulpit. If the preacher is interested in the thought process of that day, and shows that interest clearly in the process of the sermon, indeed, lets that very involved interest be a part of the sermon's substance itself, the congregation will be engaged and interested in what the preacher brings, whether it necessarily agrees with his or her viewpoints or not. This, in fact, is often the key to an effective handling of controversial ideas or viewpoints.

To lead a congregation to consider a rearrangement of its worlds, the preacher should be very clear about the present "arrangements" as the local congregation perceives them. The preacher should also be critically aware of the ways in which these worlds relate, not only to one another, but also to the Christian traditions from which they derive. The structure of these traditional configurations must be mastered in order to know where a shift in focus, a rearrangement, or a realignment with other structures and processes might

---

common with other sermon paradigms, even though the "gap" orientation brings the sermon to this "delivery" point in a much different fashion.



occur, what that shift might do to the symbol system as a whole, and what might be achieved in terms of a resignification of values and meanings for the Christian imagination.

Where else in our society is there such a forum for persistent conversation about the quality and meaningfulness of human existence? Where else do all of the worlds in which we live collide regularly for comparison and rethinking? Where else is there an occasion to confirm and celebrate Christian identity, even while analyzing the arrangements of its symbols? Where else can the social formations of the church itself, as well as those of its societies of context and our multicultural world, come together for thoughtful, outspoken critical review? It is not clear how we are to rearrange any of our imaginary or social worlds. That is because we need some time to critically assess our new situation. But one thing is clear. Before we again offer our services to heal the ills of all the world, we need to spend some time trying to better understand our worlds. Some would call this task cultural critique. The fact is that cultural critique should have a very high priority on the Christian agenda.

No congregation will be able to dwell constantly on the global issues that confront our world and challenge the future of Christianity as a religion. And not many congregations will be able to tackle many issues at the same time. As individuals, even as preachers, most of us are overwhelmed by current events, strident voices, and the knowledge explosion has left us stunned. Even our scholars, those who are set apart to study the sciences and humanities, have seldom been able to render a comprehensive assessment that accounts for the successes and failures of the human enterprise. So most congregations will settle for dealing with, and managing, a smaller set of worlds--even though the larger ones will never be very far out of mind. And

even though no congregation will be able to engage all of the issues about life in a new, multicultural world, no congregation is exempt from the disorientation created by the never-ending tensions that exist among our several imaginary worlds. So every congregation needs--and becomes--a willing, restless forum in which some of the issues calling for thought and direction can be expected to arise.

In this context, the preacher is given authority--is still given authority--by the congregation to speak. The authority does not derive from the bible; there is nothing magic about the authority or its source. The congregation selects or accepts one particular individual--the preacher for today--and implicitly asks that person to talk with it, with them. The congregation knows that it has needs, its comes with gaps intact that create tension and often deep trauma and it turns to an individual who is, at that moment, trusted to speak honestly and sincerely, to speak from her or his best study and thinking and to point to this or that shared dilemma. The congregation wants to listen; it wants to hear. Those who do not want to listen are not there. The preacher's authority arises only from the fact that those who gather believe that he or she has something to say that will address the gaps, that it will be something that will help them through, at least for now. That is the source of the preacher's authority. As long as the preacher takes that trust seriously, and speaks out of an earnest desire to be open and probe on behalf of those who listen, the sermon will do its job. Patience in this sermon exchange is required. Those who value the Christian tradition and its legacy, whether in the pulpit or in the pew, will want to be deliberate. Challenges to, and shifts in, religious or cultural paradigms are always painful procedures. Those matters must be handled slowly, in stages as it were.

But Christians can do it--if preachers have the courage to stand with them. Playing the gaps is the Christian way of sorting through our several worlds to rearrange the pieces in the light of the issues confronting us, individually and collectively. Playing the gaps is the way in which we experiment with different scenarios of our social involvements and our attitudes toward others, even those in other cultures or who struggle with cultural meshing. Playing the gaps will go a long way toward energizing our conversations both within and outside the church. It may even produce some practical proposals worth sharing with other societies and cultures. Playing the gaps may be the way to renovate the pulpit, and the pulpit's power in a land and a world that has lost its way. Playing the gaps may be the way for the preacher to once again take part in the joy of helping others make life worth living, worth celebrating, working, imagining, into the future for us all.

#### "Playing" in the Pulpit

What is still missing, though, in the preaching process, in the process of sermon preparation, is an attitude, if we may put it that way. We are missing an attitude that, regardless of what one ends up saying, or even how one goes about organizing it, the result will ultimately be appealing and communicative; it will, in other words, find its way into minds, hearts and lives that will process the sermon and in a hundred ways make it their own. It is possible, we suggest, to find such an attitude in the postmodern way of thinking and experiencing with which we began this study.

One of the keys to the postmodern ethos is that, despite the seriousness of the times, it lacks a certain seriousness. It sees the world as half make-believe, as a place where underneath all of studied somberness lurks a grin. It sees the world as needing more simplicity and spontaneity, more light-heartedness, even more laughter. And there is no reason why the preaching

of sermons should not reflect this attitude. If we sum it up, and do so in a way that good postmodern thought would approve, we would say that the sermon, in its preparation and its delivery, should partake of the quality of "play." That is why throughout this study we have utilized the phrase, "playing" the gaps.

We are helped again in this metaphor by turning back to one whose work has given life to many of the new metaphors for today's culture, the French critic and philosopher Jacques Derrida. For Derrida, the creation of discourse--such as sermons--should be approached in the spirit and even the methodology of play. For Derrida, though, play in this context has three distinct meanings and all three take on relevance for the sermon's attitude.<sup>2</sup> First, Derrida uses the notion of play in the sense of having "give," that is, if something has "play" in it, it has a quality of movement. It is not fixed. It is not secured. It is not "true" for all time. It shifts over time and in different "settings." There is an ambiguity, even, in the "joint," in that it can turn at will, that it can be one way one moment and some other way the next. This is the notion of "play." Does one have to prepare and preach a sermon that is "set" once it is done? Does one's sermon this week have to be perfectly aligned with the sermon last week, or sermons that extend back over time? Can one set aside one's sermon, or a part of one's sermon, from two weeks ago and indicate something quite different now? If one acknowledges that such a change has taken place in one's outlook, will that disorient the congregation? The fact is that one can change one's view from sermon to sermon, and, no, such

---

<sup>2</sup> The idea of "play," or literary play, is central to the work of Derrida. One of the best-known sections of his writing appears as Chapter 10 of his book Writing and Difference. The chapter is titled, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." The fact is, however, that since Derrida's writing is notoriously unsystematic, at no place does he draw together his view of "play." What follows here is a summation of his idea of play as it is pieced together from numerous references and allusions throughout his work.

acknowledgements of change--or "play"--will not disturb a postmodern congregation at all. This is, in fact, the way we all are. Our lives are lived with "play," with "give," with change and a sense of not being, or even wanting to be, fixed. The preacher is no different, and for the preacher to appear otherwise over time in the pulpit is not only dishonest, but of relatively little help to those who participate week in and week out.

The second sense in which Derrida uses the notion of "play" is his reference to something being "performed," as in performing in a "play." This is the masquerade part of playing. The emphasis here, when one thinks about the preacher and preaching, is not that one is "performing" when one stands before a group or congregation. Obviously that is the case, and the quality of one's performance is, in large part, responsible for how well the sermon is received. What is meant here, though, is something quite different. What is meant is that in language and discourse, in the sermon in this case, one is free to try on this "mask" or that one, this line of thinking or that one, this mode of acting and being or some other one. What is meant is that one does not have to have all of the "answers," or even pretend to have them all, before one stands up to "try them out." One can say, both directly and indirectly, that one is in the process of thinking through this or that, living in this mode or that one, and can only share what the world looks like now, behind this "mask" or in this particular "dress." It may or may not work. It is a "play," and we use the time and setting of the "verbal play" in order to get a feel for how things are going or might go as we live our lives. This is a style of approach, an attitude toward the pulpit, a way of doing sermons. It is an orientation to preaching that postmodern people both understand and enjoy. They can become part of the "play;" their preacher's play can become theirs, and, in fact, their reaction

to preacher/play can even become part of the ongoing "play" to be enacted over time in a kind of interactive sermon situation.

The third meaning of "play" that Derrida probes for language, literature and discourse--for the sermon--is the play of the child, the one who goes out to "play." More than anything else, this is spontaneous behavior. It is not totally unplanned, by any means, since the patterns of it work best in a repetitive framework. Nor is it completely unorganized, since for such play to be at its best, some measure of organization seems to be called for. But it is spontaneous in the sense that it evolves according to its own internal dynamic. It is activity without a sense of closure: it is time to quit now, so we must go in, but we will come back and play at a later time. It is activity without any clear-cut goals: we didn't really accomplish anything, but in what we did together we had a grand time, and we cannot wait until we can do it again. It is activity without a sense of mental constraint: what we just did brought together all of our senses and abilities, the mental, the emotional, the instinctual. the sight, smell, taste and touch of it all. Everything about us came into play, in mixes both old and new. We could think about things when we wanted to, and we did not have to when we did not want to. What we did, we enjoyed; what we enjoyed, we did. We "played" together. For preachers, this is a strange, even a very foreign, idea. And yet when this orientation to preaching is allowed to sink in, the direction it can provide for sermon preparation and delivery is quite astounding. Does it mean that we do not have to plan sermons, do not have to prepare them carefully? Does it mean that we should just let the sermons come spontaneously as we deliver them? Does it mean that sermons should always have a "childish" feel about them? These are the types of questions that invariably come to mind when we reach this notion of play as spontaneous.

The answers, though, deserve thought. Sermons must be planned and prepared carefully, whether one works from a written manuscript or from detailed notes, no matter if they are written out for the pulpit or committed to memory. While there may be an occasion here or there for a "spontaneous" sermon--in some cultural traditions, they may, in fact, be expected--the meticulous planning of the sermon is usually taken for granted, at least as an ideal. It is the equivalent of an actor possessing a well-wrought script and learning the lines thoroughly, complete with all of the nuances of expression. What often results in the performance, then, is something that appears to be utterly spontaneous, even though quite the opposite was the case. Such preparation for "spontaneity" is usually expected of the preacher who wants to deliver an effective sermon. Derrida's notion of "play" as spontaneous means, though, two basic things. First, it means that the sermon itself--what is said--must reflect thinking that is immediate and current, thinking that is spontaneous in the sense that it is still in the process of being thought while it is being said. Thinking is, in itself, an enjoyable--one wants to say "fun"--activity, and it is that kind of "thinking-fun" that the sermon must reflect. If the thoughts were created at some distant past, or even some earlier time, and are brought into the pulpit, as it were, in a past tense mood, the fun is gone, the spontaneity is gone, the "play" is missing. But if the thinking comes into the pulpit as an exciting, present activity--even if the words were composed earlier--then the "play" will happen. If when the sermon nears its close, the thinking is not "all done," then it is a sermon "to be continued," to stop now for a while but to be picked up, in some form, the next time we gather for "play." The excitement that such an approach to the sermon can generate is quite unexpected. This form of sermon-making is not particularly easy, but with

practice and experience, it not only can work, but work with extremely happy results.

.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited

- Baker, Donald G., and Charles H. Sheldon. Postwar America: The Search for Identity. Beverly Hills: Glencoe Press, 1969.
- Becker, Howard S. Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance. New York: Free Press, 1963.
- Bell, Daniel. "The Theory of Mass Society." Commentary, July 1956, 75-83.
- Birnbaum, Norman. The Crisis of Industrial Society. London: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- Burke, Kenneth. A Grammar of Motives. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature and Method. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1935.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action. New York: Vintage Books, 1941.
- \_\_\_\_\_. A Rhetoric of Motives. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.
- Cassirer, Ernst. An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Language and Myth. Trans. Susanne Langer. New York: Dover Publications, 1946.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. 3 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953-57.
- Cobb, John B. Christ in a Pluralistic Age. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Process Theology as Political Theology. Manchester: Manchester University Press; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982.
- Cobb, John B., and David Griffin. Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976.

- Conot, Robert. Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness. New York: Bantam Books, 1967.
- Dasmann, Raymond F. The Destruction of California. New York: Macmillan, 1965.
- Derrida, Jacques. Of Grammatology. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Writing and Difference. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Duncan, Hugh D. Symbols and Social Theory. New York: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- Edelman, Murray. The Symbolic Uses of Politics. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964.
- Eslinger, Richard L. A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletic Method. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987.
- Gusfield, Joseph R. Symbolic Crusade: Status, Politics and the American Temperance Movement. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963.
- Hartshorne, Charles. Beyond Humanism: Essays in the Philosophy of Nature. New York: Willett, Clark and Co., 1937.
- \_\_\_\_\_. A Natural Theology for Our Time. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing, 1967.
- Heilbroner, Robert L. The Making of Economic Society. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962.
- Huizinga, Johan. Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture. Boston: Beacon Press, 1950.
- Jacobs, Norman, ed. Culture for the Millions? Mass Media in Modern Society. Boston: Beacon Press, 1957.
- Jacobs, Paul. Prelude to Riot: A View of Urban America From the Bottom. New York: Vintage Books, 1966.
- Kamuf, Peggy, ed. A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
- Kolko, Joyce. America and the Crisis of World Capitalism. Boston: Beacon Press, 1974.

- Kornhauser, William. The Politics of Mass Society. New York: Free Press, 1959.
- Langer, Susanne. Philosophical Sketches. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1962.
- Long, Thomas G. The Witness of Preaching. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989.
- Mack, Burton L. "The Gospel and the Gaps: A Worldly Theory of Preaching." MS. School of Theology at Claremont, 1993.
- Manis, Jerome G., and Bernard N. Meltzer, comps. Symbolic Interaction: A Reader in Social Psychology. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1967.
- Mead, George Herbert. Mind, Self and Society. Ed. Charles W. Morris. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934.
- \_\_\_\_\_. On Social Psychology. Ed. Anselm Strauss. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956.
- Michael, Donald N. The Next Generation: The Prospects Ahead for the Youth of Today and Tomorrow. New York: Vintage Books, 1965.
- Nash, Gerald D. The American West in the Twentieth Century: A Short History of an Urban Oasis. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973.
- National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy. Washington, D. C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1986.
- Nisbet, Robert A. The Social Bond: An Introduction to the Study of Society. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Sociological Tradition. New York: Basic Books, 1966.
- Park, Robert E. On Social Control and Collective Behavior. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.
- Park, Robert E., Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie. The City. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.
- Parrington, Vernon Louis. The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America: 1860-1920. 3 vols. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958.
- Polenberg, Richard. One Nation Divisible: Class, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States Since 1938. New York: Viking Press, 1980.
- Rosenberg, Bernard, and David Manning White, eds. Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America. New York: Free Press, 1957.

- Schiller, Herbert I. Mass Communications and American Empire. New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1969.
- Shibutani, Tamotsu, ed. Human Nature and Collective Behavior: Papers in Honor of Herbert Blumer. New Brunswick, N. J.: Transaction Books, 1973.
- Skornia, Harry J. Television and Society: An Inquest and Agenda for Improvement. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965.
- Smith, Christine M. Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in Feminist Perspective. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989.
- Teich, Albert H., ed. Technology and Man's Future. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972.
- Thomas, W. I. On Social Organization and Social Personality. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Unadjusted Girl: With Cases and Standpoint for Behavioral Analysis. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1923.
- Thrasher, Frederick M. The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927.
- Webb, Joseph M. Hub Symbols. Malibu: The Center for the Study of Christian Communication, 1983.
- Wells, Alan, ed. Mass Communications: A World View. New York: National Press Books, 1974.
- White, Leslie A. The Science of Culture: A Study of Man and Civilization. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1949.
- Whitehead, Alfred North. Process and Reality. New York: Macmillan, 1929.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Religion in the Making. New York: Macmillan, 1926.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect. New York: Macmillan, 1927.
- Williams, Raymond. Television: Technology and Cultural Form. New York: Schocken Books, 1974.

#### Works Consulted

- Aron, Raymond. Main Currents in Sociological Thought II: Durkheim, Pareto, Weber. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1970.
- Becker, Ernst. Angel in Armor: A Post-Freudian Perspective on the Nature of Man. New York: George Braziller, 1969.

- Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckman. The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1967.
- Boulding, Kenneth E. The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1956.
- Boyne, Roy, and Ali Rattansi, eds. Postmodernism and Society. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990.
- Bramson, Leon. The Political Context of Sociology. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.
- Braude, Lee. A Sense of Sociology. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974.
- Burke, Kenneth. Attitudes Toward History. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Counter-Statement. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968.
- Chefdor, Ricardo Quinones, and Albert Wachtel, eds. Modernism: Challenges and Perspectives. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986.
- Cooley, Charles Horton. Social Organization. New York: Schocken Books, 1937.
- Dodd, Carley. Dynamics of Intercultural Communication. Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1982.
- Drucker, Peter F. The New Society: The Anatomy of Industrial Order. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1949.
- Duncan, Hugh Dalziel. Communication and Social Order. London: Oxford University Press, 1962.
- Emery, Michael, and Ted Curtis Smythe, eds. Readings in Mass Communication: Concepts and Issues in the Mass Media. Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown, 1983.
- Fischer, Heinz-Dietrick, and John C. Merrill, eds. International Communication: Media, Channels, Functions. New York: Hastings House, 1970.
- Frank, Armin Paul. Kenneth Burke. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969.
- Friedenberg, Edgar Z. Coming of Age in America: Growth and Acquiescence. New York: Vintage Books, 1963.
- Giles, Howard, and Mikolas Coupland. Language: Contexts and Consequences. Pacific Grove, Calif.: Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1991.
- Goffman, Erving. Behavior in Public Places. New York: Free Press, 1963.

- Goffman, Erving. Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face to Face Behavior. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1967.
- Hawkes, Terence. Structuralism and Semiotics. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977.
- Heilbroner, Robert L., and Lester C. Thurow. The Economic Problem. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1975.
- Higham, John, ed. The Reconstruction of American History. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962.
- Hofstadter, Richard. The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R. New York: Vintage Books, 1955.
- Horowitz, Irving Louis. Power, Politics and People: The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills. London: Oxford University Press, 1963.
- Karl, Frederick R. Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist, 1885-1925. New York: Atheneum Press, 1985.
- Keck, Leander. The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978.
- Keil, Charles. Urban Blues. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.
- Langer, Susanne. Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953.
- LeRoy, David L., and Christopher H., eds. Mass News: Practices, Controversies and Alternatives. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973.
- Levin, Kim. Beyond Modernism: Essays on Art From the 70s and 80s. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.
- Long, Thomas G. Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989.
- Lull, David J., and William Beardsley, eds. Biblical Preaching on the Death of Jesus. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989.
- Maus, Heinz. A Short History of Sociology. New York: Citadel Press, 1966.
- Mead, George Herbert. Selected Writings. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964.
- Merton, Robert K., Leonard Broom, and Leonard S. Cottrell, eds. Sociology Today: Problems and Prospects. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959.
- Moore, Wilbert E., and Robert M. Cook, eds. Readings on Social Change. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967.

- Natoli, Joseph, ed. Tracing Literary Theory. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Nichols, Marie Hochmuth. Rhetoric and Criticism. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963.
- Nye, Russell Blaine. The Cultural Life of the New Nation, 1776-1830. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960.
- Perez, Bertha, and Maria E. Torres-Guzman. Learning in Two Worlds: An Integrated Spanish/English Biliteracy Approach. New York: Longman, 1992.
- Piven, Frances Fox, and Richard A. Cloward. Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare. New York: Pantheon Books, 1971.
- Rice, Charles A. Interpretation and Imagination: The Preacher and Contemporary Literature. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970.
- Robertson, Roland, ed. Sociology of Religion. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969.
- Sennett, Richard, and Jonathan Cobb. The Hidden Injuries of Class. New York: Vintage Books, 1962.
- Wardlaw, Don M., ed. Preaching Biblically: Creating Sermons in the Shape of Scripture. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983.
- Warner, W. Lloyd. American Life: Dream and Reality. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953.
- Wright, Charles. Mass Communication: A Sociological Perspective. New York: Random House, 1959.
- Znaniecki, Florian. On Humanistic Sociology. Ed. Robert Bierstedt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969.